



Learn the best  
ways to compose  
your pictures!

# Composition

From Snapshots to Great Shots

Get great detail  
in your subjects!

**Laurie Excell**  
John Batdorff  
David Brommer  
Rick Rickman  
Steve Simon

Composition:  
From  
Snapshots to  
Great Shots

**Laurie Excell**

with

John Batdorff

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**Rick Rickman** is a Pulitzer Prize-winning Southern California photographer with 30 years' experience. His work has been featured on many covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines. His project and documentary work has appeared in publications such as *National Geographic*, *Life*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Smithsonian*. Rick has traveled the world covering Olympic competitions, wars, and political upheavals as well as innumerable social interests and events. His abilities cross over every photographic discipline, and his greatest motivator is the challenge presented by each opportunity. See his work at [rickrickman.com](http://rickrickman.com).

**Steve Simon** has been passionate about documenting the beauty and drama of the human condition for his entire photographic life. The author of four photography books, with works in major museum collections around the world, he has had solo shows in New York, Buenos Aires, Toronto, and Montreal. His work has been featured at the Visa Pour L'Image Photojournalism Festival, in Perpignan, France. He is on the Apple Aperture Advisory Board and faculty of International Center of Photography (ICP) and School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York. He has led workshops all over the world, including Mentor Series, Macworld, PhotoPlus Expo, and Gulf Photo Plus in Dubai. His forthcoming books include: *Steve Simon's Nikon Dream System* (Lark) and *The Passionate Photographer* (New Riders). See his work at [stevesimonphoto.com](http://stevesimonphoto.com).

## DEDICATION

To my mom and dad, Ramona and Harold Excell, and to my loving husband, Frank Lohr, for all your love and support in this crazy adventure that I have embarked upon.

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This book would not be possible if not for the perseverance of Nikki McDonald and Ted Waitt, and their unwavering desire to have me as an author for Peachpit. Thanks.

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My knowledge of photography is the sum of all the photographers I have known and who inspire me, as well as the students I meet at various workshops to the pros I am fortunate to call my friends. I thank each and every one of you for sharing your passion for photography. I am a better person for each experience.

I want to thank the four other photographers whose names are also on this book. I appreciate your contribution and words of wisdom in your fields of expertise:

John Batdorff—Chapter 7, “Black and White”

Rick Rickman—Chapter 8, “Sports and Composition”

David Brommer—Chapter 9, “Beyond the Rule of Thirds”

Steve Simon—Chapter 10, “The Compositional Dance”

I would be remiss not to mention at least a couple of photographers who have influenced me with their wisdom and passion for photography: Moose Peterson, my mentor, my friend, my big brother. You recognized that spark of interest in me and mentored me along the way to a full-blown passion for photographing the natural world. You held me to a high standard, but none higher than the standard to which you hold yourself. For this I thank you. Joe McNally for your friendship and guidance, and for telling me to say yes to the things that scare me the most. The rewards of that simple word far exceed the fear of the unknown. Thank you!

And most of all I want to thank my father for giving me the gift of photography when I was a child; my mother for her unwavering belief in me and the certainty that I can do anything I set my mind to while maintaining an objective view of my work; and my loving husband, Frank—I could not sustain the crazy pace without your love and support. You encourage me to go, go when I know that you really want me to stay, stay. I love you, honey.

—Laurie Excell

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# Introduction

Taking your photography from snapshots to great shots begins with having a solid understanding of your camera and lenses so that you can intuitively move from one camera setting to another, capturing the moment as it unfolds. Although this is a book on composition, I start at the beginning, with the camera, and provide you with the building blocks to establish a strong foundation for making photographs rather than simply taking them. I cover the basic camera settings I use that enable me to capture peak of action or to chase the light as it dances across the landscape. The lens you use directly impacts your photographic style. Having a lens that complements your vision of the world is part of the process of making great shots, so I spend some time discussing lenses, to give you a better grasp of what lenses do and why you may need one type of lens over another. And, finally, I cover some essential accessories and filters that I carry in my bag to further enable me to make the images you see in this book.

Understanding light and exposure is probably one of the biggest roadblocks to making great images. In Chapter 2, I explain the exposure triangle and how aperture, shutter speed, and ISO relate to each other. Knowing which exposure combination to select gives you the creative control needed to bring your vision to life—from capturing great depth of field with everything within the frame in great detail, to isolating your subject and making it pop, to capturing peak of action or implying motion through the use of creative blur. For more in-depth coverage of exposure, check out Jeff Revell's book *Exposure: From Snapshots to Great Shots*.

Light is what gives your subject shape, form, and texture; it has quality and quantity. Light is what gives your images mood, drama, and emotion. Without light, there would be no photographs. Knowing how to capture that light can be the difference between a simple snapshot and a great shot. Shadow and light lead your viewer's eye through your image and to your subject. One of the first things I look at when bringing the camera to my eye is the play of light on the scene before me and how I can use the light to make a dramatic image.

After you have read the first three chapters and have gone through the settings on your camera and worked through the assignments, you then need to take a look at the way you arrange the elements within your photographs—in other words, explore your composition. You have probably heard many of the “rules” about what makes a good composition. I like to think of the rules more as suggestions to making better images that capture your viewer's attention, giving them a sense of what you saw and felt the moment you clicked the shutter. Chapter 4 discusses the use of lines, shapes, and patterns to direct the path your viewers take through your images to get to the subject. I cover leading lines, straight lines, S-curves, and the way they come together to create graphic elements of shapes and patterns.

Continuing down the composition path, Chapter 5 discusses color, the use of complementary and contrasting colors, and the emotional impact that the variety of colors have on your viewers.

I wrap up my part of the book in Chapter 6, with discussions and illustrations of spatial relationships and subject placement—from frame-filling to environmental compositions, placement of horizon lines, vertical versus horizontal orientation, camera angle, perspective, and much more.

After completing the first six chapters, you will have a much better grasp of what makes a compelling image and how to take your photography from snapshots to great shots. But wait—there's more. The additional chapters in this book are written by four outstanding photographers, who have expertise in various photographic fields. They have graciously contributed their perception of composition and how it relates to their subjects, using their outstanding images to illustrate the points they make. In Chapter 7, John Batdorff covers black-and-white composition; in Chapter 8, Rick Rickman discusses sports and action photography; in Chapter 9, David Brommer takes you beyond the rule of thirds; and in Chapter 10, Steve Simon discusses the compositional dance.

So what are you waiting for! It's time to get started on your journey from taking snapshots to making great shots.

*Don't forget to share your results with the book's Flickr group!*

*Join the group here: [flickr.com/groups/composition\\_fromsnapshotstogreatshots](https://www.flickr.com/groups/composition_fromsnapshotstogreatshots)*



1

# Equipment

## THE EQUIPMENT YOU USE DIRECTLY AFFECTS YOUR PHOTOGRAPHIC STYLE

With the technology of today's digital cameras, anyone can take good pictures. However, it takes the right equipment and skill behind the camera as well as in the digital darkroom to make great photographs. Does your camera offer the features that best suit your needs? Does it have a full frame or cropped sensor? Can you get fast enough frames per second to capture peak of action? If you're shooting in low light, does your camera offer low enough noise to produce acceptable results? Does your equipment complement your photographic style, or is your photographic style determined by the equipment you own? Answering these questions, and others, helps to determine which camera is right for you. Many manufacturers offer a variety of cameras, lenses, and accessories to customize your system to best suit your style.

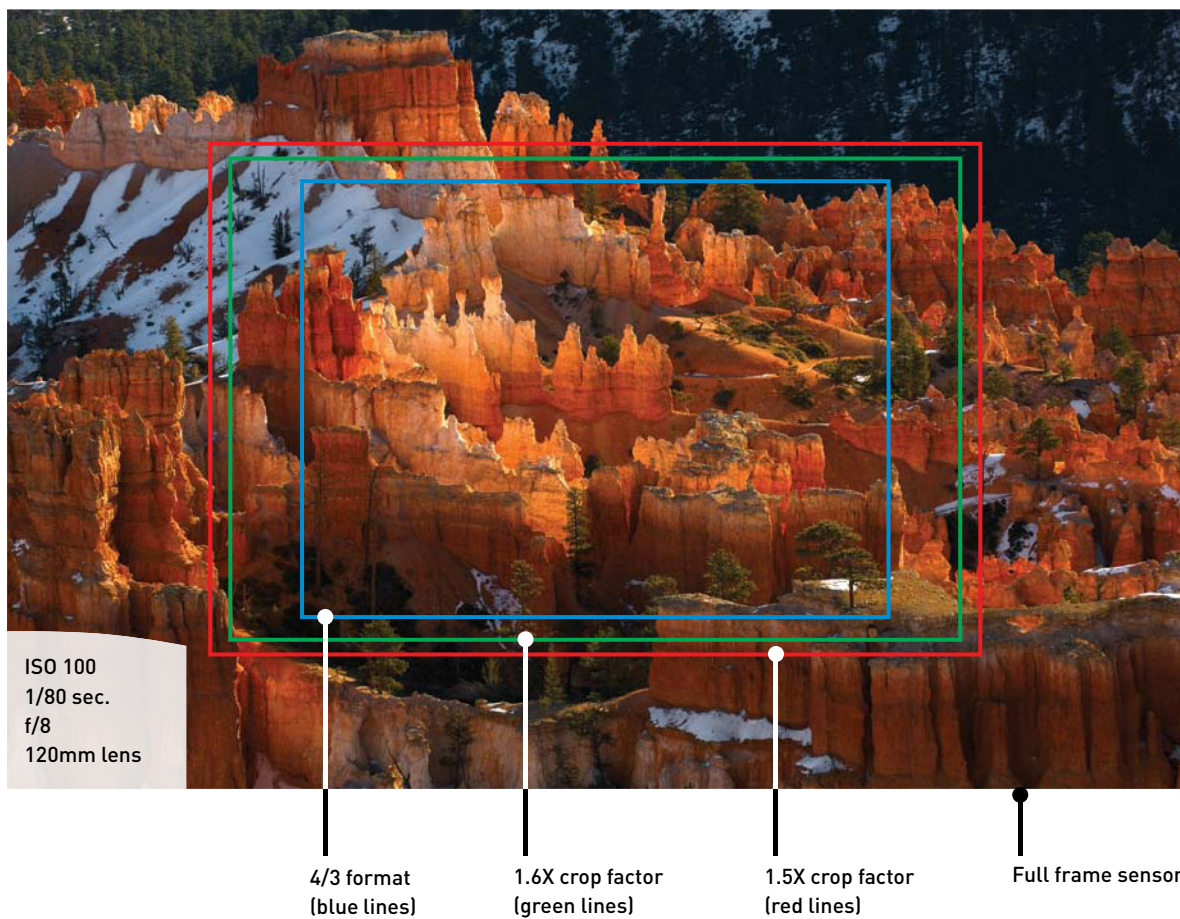
The lenses you own dictate what you will include within your frame as well as what you will leave out. The aperture you select controls what is in sharp focus and what is blurred (depth of field).

Your camera settings can help you capture the image you see in your mind's eye. How you adjust the exposure settings, the focus points, the color space, and so on makes a photograph uniquely yours.



## PORING OVER THE EQUIPMENT

Cameras are available in a variety of formats, from full frame (24X36) to 1.5/1.6X cropped sensors and 4/3 format. The sensor size plays a role in the number of pixels your camera has as well as how it handles low light. Your camera's sensor size affects the focal length of your lenses by the rated magnification (crop) factor of the camera. For example, for those of you with most Nikons (entry level to mid-range), you'll need to multiply your lenses' focal length by 1.5X; for Canons in the same category, multiply your lenses' focal length by 1.6X; and for 4/3 sensors, multiply your lenses' focal length by 2X to get the equivalent focal length of the lenses on your camera. The cropped sensor gives a sense of greater magnification by cropping the image on a smaller sensor. Many people like the extra "magnification" of the cropped sensor for moving in tighter on the subject. On the other hand, full-frame sensors make it possible to go to ultra-wide angles, with lenses being their actual, designated focal length with no multipliers, to increase the magnification. Full size sensors generally have lower noise (which means more room for the pixels to spread out). The 4/3 camera systems relinquish sensor size in favor of compact physical size.



## PORING OVER THE EQUIPMENT

Selecting the lens that best matches your vision is the next step in defining your style. You'll need to consider more than just focal length and angle of view. There is maximum aperture to think about, Vibration Reduction/Image Stabilization, AF-S/USM (silent wave focus motors), and minimum focus distance, not to mention size, weight, and cost. The decisions you make about which lens to choose will play an important role in the outcome of your image. Take control of your photography by using a lens for its features, not just because it came with the camera.

These images were all made from the same location; the camera was set at ISO 200 using aperture priority at f/16.



14–24mm 2.8 @ 14mm



24–70mm 2.8 @ 24mm



24–70mm 2.8 @ 70mm



70–200mm 2.8 @ 200mm



200–400mm 4.0 @ 400mm



600mm 4.0



## WHAT'S IN MY BAG

I am fortunate enough to have the privilege of photographing the natural wonders of our world. These marvels range from grandiose landscapes to intimate wildlife encounters. It's not uncommon for me to go from bundling up in layer upon layer of arctic wear to brave the below-zero temperatures of winter in Yellowstone National Park directly to the hot and humid shores of Tampa Bay. With water lapping at my legs, you'll find me scooting along on my belly inch by forward inch, camera attached to my 600mm f/4 lens sliding smoothly along in its custom ground pod and on a Frisbee from the local pet store, as I stalk small shorebirds at their eye level. Lightning? No problem, I have the tools to capture lightning in my bag. If I need more reach, I have a teleconverter or two handy at all times. If I need to make adjustments to my camera in the predawn darkness, there's a flashlight in my pocket. If I need a little more light on the subject? I reach for my flash along with the off-camera cord. Having the right tools in my bag (**Figure 1.1**) and the proficiency to use them at a moment's notice is what allows me to make the images I do.

**FIGURE 1.1**  
My Moose MP-1 bag  
and all my essential  
accessories.



## IN THE BAG

Nikon D3X/D3S or 2-D3S bodies	Nikon SB-900 w/ SC-29 TTL cord
Nikon AF 16mm 2.8 Fisheye	Lexar Pro 32 GB 600X, 16 GB 600X CF cards
Nikon AF-S 14–24mm 2.8	EN-EL4 spare battery (one per camera)
Nikon AF-S 24–70mm 2.8	Nikon MC-36 remote release
Nikon AF-S 70–200mm 2.8 VR II	Flashlight
Nikon AF-S 200–400mm F4 VR II	Circular polarizer, graduated ND, Vari-ND
Nikon AF-S 600mm F4 VR	Raincoat for camera
Nikon TC-14E II, TC 17E II, TC 20E III	Microfiber cloth

## CAMERAS

As a nature photographer, I am exposed to some pretty harsh environments, from minus temperatures and sulphuric steam in Yellowstone to sand and salt on the beaches of Florida. Loving weather the way I do, it's not uncommon for me to get caught in a downpour. I chose my camera bodies based on the fact that they are rugged enough to withstand whatever conditions I put them through. In addition, I need a high-performance camera to enable me to capture peak of action when a bird flies past or a bear takes off running through a stream in hot pursuit of a fish. Here are the cameras I use and some key features that were influential in my decision making:

Nikon D3X:

- Ultra high-resolution sensor (24 megapixels) for fine detail and large output
- 100 percent “what you see is what you get” viewfinder
- Full frame (FX) sensor

Nikon D3S (X2):

- High performance (speed = nine frames per second) for capturing peak of action
- Low noise in low-light situations or at high ISO settings
- 100 percent “what you see is what you get” viewfinder
- Full frame (FX) format
- High resolution (12 megapixels)



## LENSES

With the huge selection of lenses available, it's hard to decide which lens is best suited for your unique style. Is the convenience of a zoom lens preferable to the speed of a prime lens? Variable and fixed-aperture zoom lenses are also available to choose from, but which best suits your needs and budget? What about VR (Vibration Reduction) or IS (Image Stabilization) for hand-holding in low light? I always recommend buying the best lenses you can afford. A wider aperture may be the difference between a sharp image and one that isn't quite sharp enough.

I buy the fastest, sharpest lenses Nikon has to offer to assist me in making the best images I can (**Figure 1.2**). I utilize the speed of Nikon's fast lenses as well as Vibration Reduction and my ability to hand hold at much slower shutter speeds than I could otherwise. Silent Wave motors in most of my lenses ensure that I have the quickest and quietest focus possible; they also give me the ability to instantly reach up and take control of the focus ring without having to fumble for the AF switch.

### FIGURE 1.2

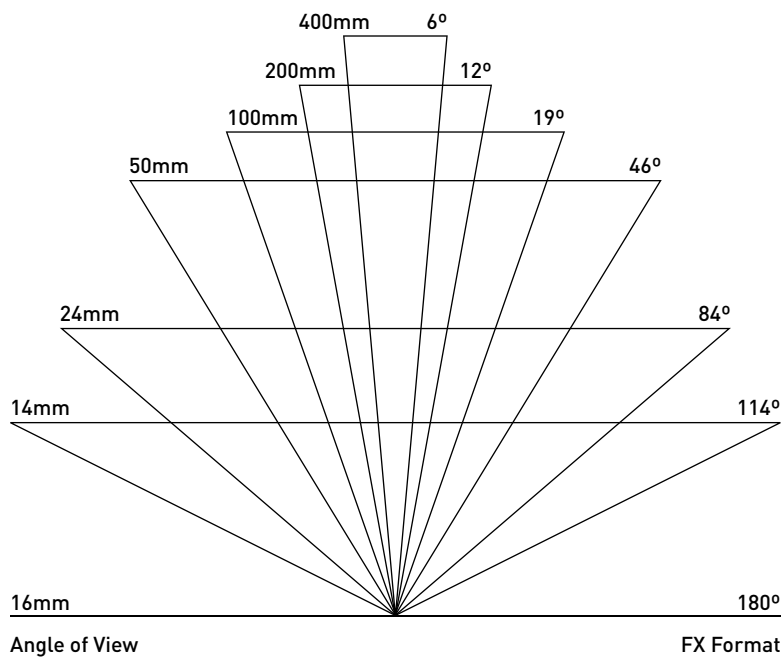
Here are the Nikon lenses I use.

(From left to right: AF 16mm 2.8D, AF-S 14–24mm 2.8G, AF-S 24–70mm 2.8G, AF-S 70–200mm 2.8G VR II, AF-S 200–400mm 4.0G VR II, AF-S 600mm 4.0 VR)

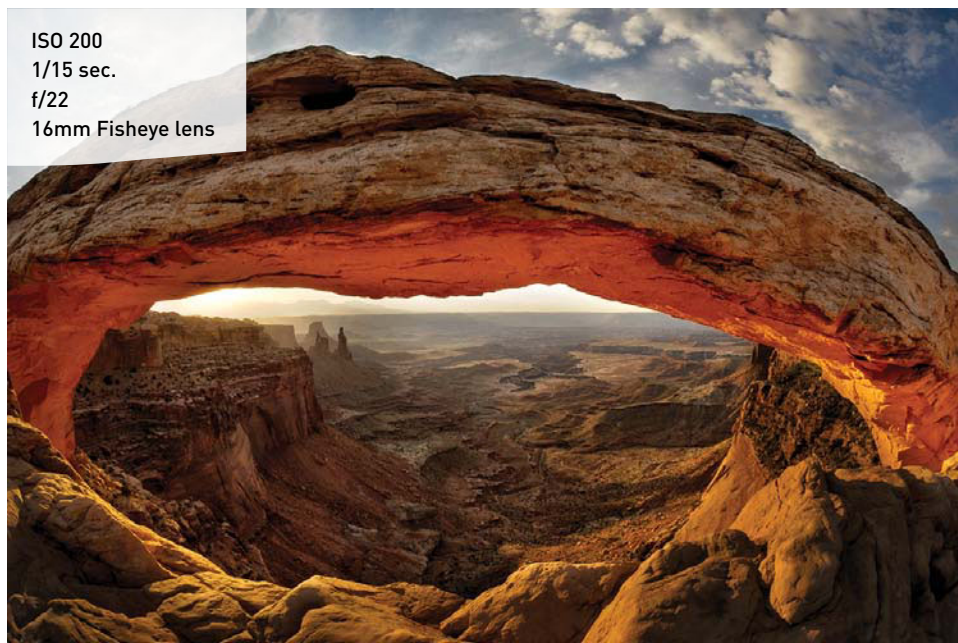


The angle of view chart you see in **Figure 1.3** depicts the range of coverage of different lenses, from the 180-degree angle of view of a fisheye to the very narrow, isolating angle of view of a super telephoto. The angle of view determines just how much of a given scene will be included as well as what will be excluded in your images.

An AF 16mm f/2.8 Fisheye lens with its 180-degree, all-encompassing angle of view allows me to capture everything in sight within the frame (**Figure 1.4**). The fisheye is known and loved for its distortion.



**FIGURE 1.3**  
Angle of view chart  
for various lenses.

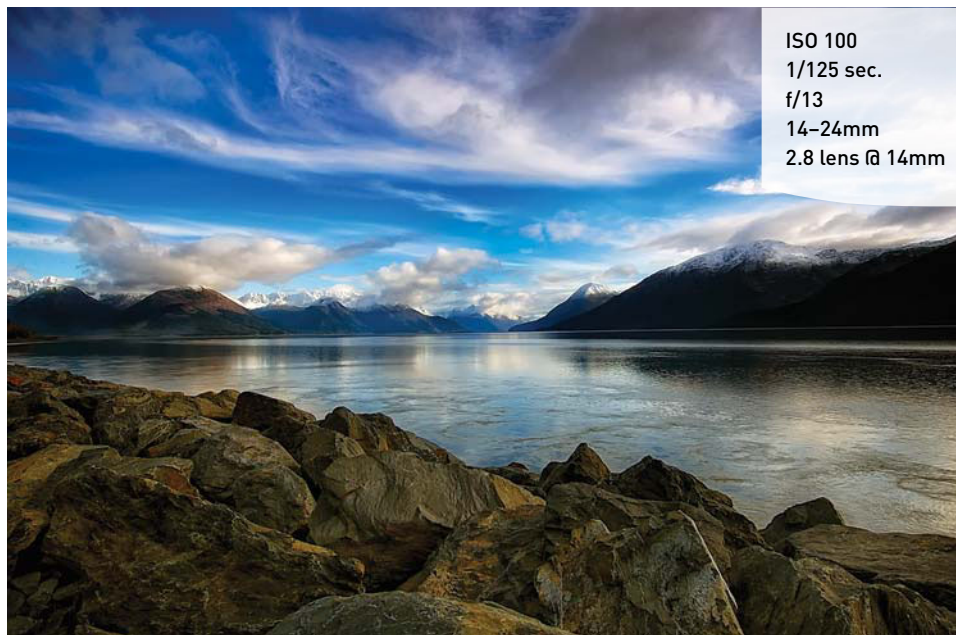


**FIGURE 1.4**  
With nearly 40  
people crowding  
around Mesa Arch,  
the Fisheye lens  
was called into  
service, enabling  
me to move in close  
to eliminate the  
people and still  
frame the arch from  
side to side.

I use an AF-S 14-24mm f/2.8 ultra-wide, rectilinear (corrected against distortion) lens that covers 114–84 degrees for sweeping landscapes with dramatic foregrounds (**Figure 1.5**).

### FIGURE 1.5

Moving in tight on the foreground, closing the aperture down to a small opening (more on apertures in Chapter 2), and tilting the camera to include the distant horizon gives images great visual depth and invites the viewer to enter your world through the portal of your photographs.



The AF-S 24–70mm f/2.8 is a great all-around, mid-range zoom (**Figure 1.6**). This is my “carry-everywhere lens,” with its 84–34 degree angle of view.

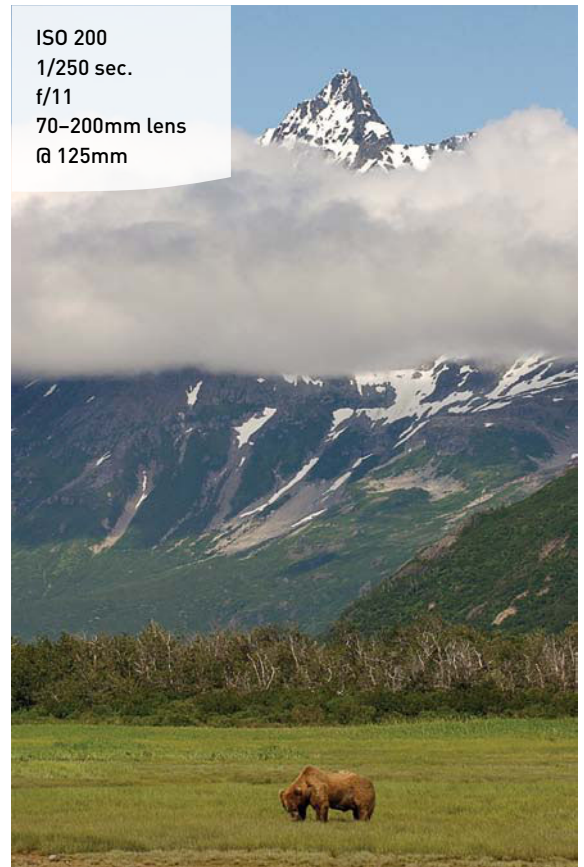
The AF-S 70–200mm f/2.8 VR II, with its tack-sharp optics, is a great mid-range telephoto zoom lens for portraits as well as for pulling details out of a scene (**Figure 1.7**). The VR II allows me to hand hold the camera at up to four stops slower than normal. Both the speed (2.8) and the focal length of the 70-200mm allow me to focus on my subject and have the background disappear into a soft blur of diffused colors.

An AF-S 200–400mm f/4 VR II is my main “big game” and intimate landscape lens (**Figure 1.8**). This is my lens of choice for hand-holding from a boat to capture birds in flight or breaching whales.



**FIGURE 1.6**

With coverage from wide to slightly telephoto, the mid-range zoom is ideal for both environmental as well as head-and-shoulder portraits.



**FIGURE 1.7**

I truly appreciate the versatility of a telephoto zoom when I have a frame-filling subject moving towards me. I simply reach out and turn the zoom ring to a wider focal length and keep shooting.



### FIGURE 1.8

A zoom lens in the telephoto range can be invaluable when you can't move enough to get closer to your subject. Simply let your lens do the walking by zooming in on your subject for a tighter composition.



ISO 400  
1/125 sec.  
f/5.6  
200–400mm lens  
@ 240mm

An AF-S 600mm f/4 VR is the “big gun” for wildlife photography (**Figure 1.9**). I’m an in-your-face kind of photographer. I want to be up close and personal with my subjects.



**FIGURE 1.9**  
The 600mm helps me isolate my subjects from the background, which makes them pop.

## TELECONVERTERS

Teleconverters are designed to increase the magnification of telephoto lenses. When your 600mm still doesn’t get you that frame-filling composition, simply attach a teleconverter between the body and lens, and increase the focal length of your lens by the teleconverter’s multiplication factor. **Figure 1.10** shows the teleconverters I use.

A TC-14E II increases the magnification of my telephoto lenses by 1.4 times, with a one-stop loss of light (example: 200–400mm f/4 with 1.4X= 280–560mm f/5.6).

The TC-17E II increases the magnification of my telephoto lenses by 1.7 times, with a one-and-a-half stop loss of light (example: 200–400mm f/4 with 1.7X= 340–680mm f/6.7). At a maximum aperture of f/6.7, the speed of focus slows down noticeably; the center AF is the strongest sensor.



**FIGURE 1.10**

TC-14E II, 1.4X (left); TC-17E II, 1.7X (center); TC-20E III, 2X (right). Autofocus works best at apertures of 5.6 or wider. Adding a teleconverter to your lens reduces the maximum aperture, possibly slowing down the focus speed or disabling it all together.

A TC-20E III increases the magnification of my telephoto lenses by two times, with a two-stop loss of light (**Figure 1.11**). With the 2X on, AF is slowed down significantly, and I will usually resort to manual focus (example: 600mm f/4 with 2X= 1200mm f/8.0).

**FIGURE 1.11**

Adding the 2X teleconverter to my 600mm lens and lowering the tripod to the ground gave me the best angle of view when this hooded warbler caught a crane fly.



## LENS SHADES

All I can say is, “use them!” Lens shades block extraneous light from entering the front element and bouncing around within the lens, degrading the clarity of the image. They are also great protection for the front element because they protrude in front of the optics, protecting them from bumps and bangs.



Without lens shade



With lens shade



## FILTERS

Filters expand your ability to create an image with the visual impact that you felt when you clicked the shutter. Your eyes adjust to the extreme shadows and highlights of a bright day. You see colors for their values, whereas your cameras see colors in temperatures. In my bag, I carry a few filters to help me capture the colors and compact the exposure as desired.

### POLARIZER

A circular polarizer removes the reflection of a blue sky from the landscape, the glare of water off rocks, the sheen of light glancing off a smooth surface, and more. And here you thought it was just to make the sky bluer and the clouds puffier. But it does all of the above and that too. Simply thread it onto your lens and turn the front ring until the reflection disappears and the colors turn richer and warmer. **Figures 1.12** and **1.13** show an image shot without and with a polarizer.

**FIGURE 1.12**

Without a polarizer.





**FIGURE 1.13**  
With a polarizer. A polarizing filter removes the reflection of the blue sky, bringing out the colors of Grand Prismatic Springs.

## POLARIZER

A polarizer is a great stand-in when you need to drop the shutter speed in very bright light. Simply thread the polarizer onto your lens and turn it until the shutter speed is at its slowest (one-and-one-half to two stops reduction in light).

## GRADUATED NEUTRAL DENSITY

The exposure range in the image of Mount Hood was greater than my camera could capture in one click (**Figure 1.14**). If I exposed for the sky, I lost detail in the reflection (too dark). If I exposed for the reflection, I lost detail in the sky and mountain (too bright). With a straight line along the horizon separating the brighter area from the dark, I simply held my graduated neutral density filter (**Figure 1.15**) in front of the lens and was able to compact the exposure another three stops, which gave me good values in both the mountain and the reflection (**Figure 1.16**).

**FIGURE 1.14**

Without graduated neutral density filter.

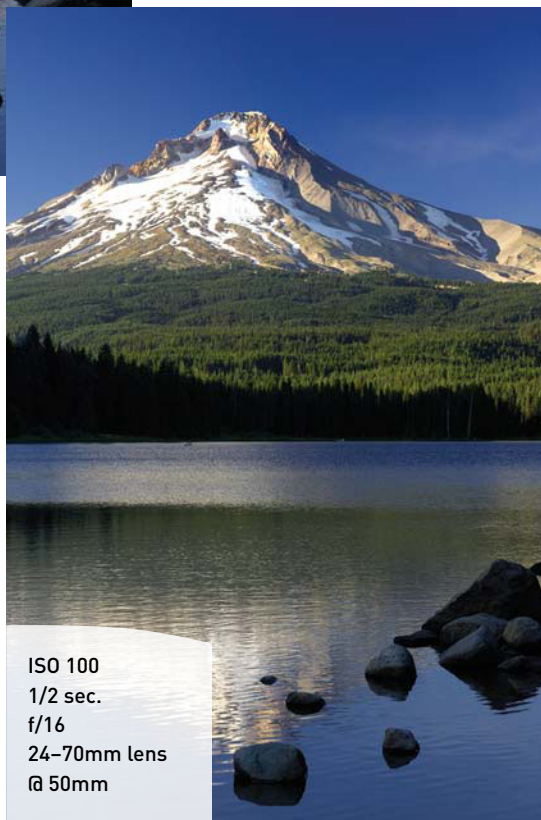


**FIGURE 1.15**

Lee ND.9 (three stop) soft, graduated neutral density filter.

**FIGURE 1.16**

With three-stop graduated neutral density filter with gradient along the shoreline.



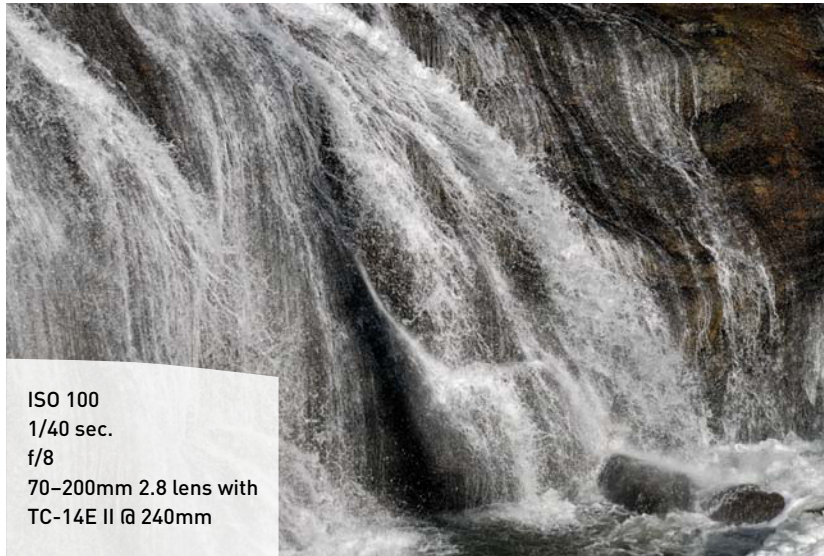
## VARIABLE-NEUTRAL DENSITY

When the light is too bright to allow for a slow shutter speed, I pull out my Singh Ray Vari-ND filter (**Figure 1.17**). It has a range of two to eight stops of light reduction. Simply thread it on the front of the lens and turn it until you get the desired shutter speed.

Figures 1.18 and 1.19 show an image shot without and with my Singh Ray Vari-ND filter.



**FIGURE 1.17**  
Singh Ray Vari-ND filter.



**FIGURE 1.18**  
Without the Vari-ND filter.



**FIGURE 1.19**  
With the Vari-ND filter.



## ACCESSORIES

Several additional accessories can come in handy when you're on a shoot. Here are the accessories that are always in my bag.

An SB-900 TTL (through-the-lens) fill flash removes color cast on overcast days or in shade and adds fill light to shadows. Having a flash in my bag gives me added control over light (**Figure 1.20**).

**FIGURE 1.20**

Using fill flash on an overcast day is an excellent way to remove color cast from your subject and add some extra punch. Fill flash will add catchlights to your subject's eyes.



Lexar Professional 16 and 32 GB 600X CompactFlash cards store my images. Media is cheap, I shoot a lot, and I don't ever want to run out of cards when on an important shoot, so I carry a wallet full of high-speed, high-capacity cards. The high-speed cards surpass the camera's write speed and download onto my computer quickly.

I carry a spare EN-EL4 battery for each camera to ensure that I can keep shooting no matter how long the day and how heavy the action. The same battery fits all of my cameras, which is a huge convenience for compatibility and also lightens the load of having to carry extra chargers when I travel.

A Nikon MC-36 Remote Release has an interval timer that I use for photographing star trails or group shots, and a lock for shooting extended periods of time in Bulb mode.

A flashlight/headlamp is essential because nature photographers are out before dawn and often well past sunset, so we need a good light to see our cameras and make adjustments. A headlamp provides hands-free light.

A Shutter Hat raincoat protects my camera and lenses up to 200mm from adverse weather. I use a Hydrophobia for my camera with either the 200–400mm or the 600mm lens attached.

Microfiber cloth keeps my lenses clean and shiny.

My MP-1 bag was designed by wildlife photographer Moose Peterson. The MP-1 will hold up to a 600mm with a body attached. Every bag in the MP series (MP-1, MP-3, MP-5, and MP-7) is designed to fit in the overhead of the smallest commuter plane, giving me the confidence that I won't have to relinquish my camera equipment to a gate check.

The tripod/head combinations (**Figure 1.21**) I use are Gitzo GT5541LS Wimberley Head II (Gimbal head: **Figure 1.22**) to support my long lenses, and the Gitzo GT3541LS with the Really Right Stuff BH-55 for everything else. I rely on the lightweight strength and durability of the Gitzo tripods in the field. In addition to their light weight and stability, the positive locking and release of the 6X twist adjustments make setting up and dismantling a quick job. The lack of a center column allows me to get down to eye level with many of my subjects.

When lightning strikes, I am ready with my trusty Lightning Trigger (**Figure 1.23**). I simply plug it into the camera and sit back while the Lightning Trigger fires the camera for me (**Figure 1.24**).



**FIGURE 1.21**  
My tripod/head combination.



**FIGURE 1.22**  
The Wimberley Head II.



**FIGURE 1.23**  
With the Lightning Trigger plugged in to my camera, I am able to photograph lightning without having to set my camera in Bulb mode and hold the shutter open while hoping for a strike within the area of sky I am aiming at. I just set up my camera, plug in the Lightning Trigger, and enjoy the show.

**FIGURE 1.24**  
Capturing this awesome lightning bolt while storm chasing would not have been possible without my Lightning Trigger.



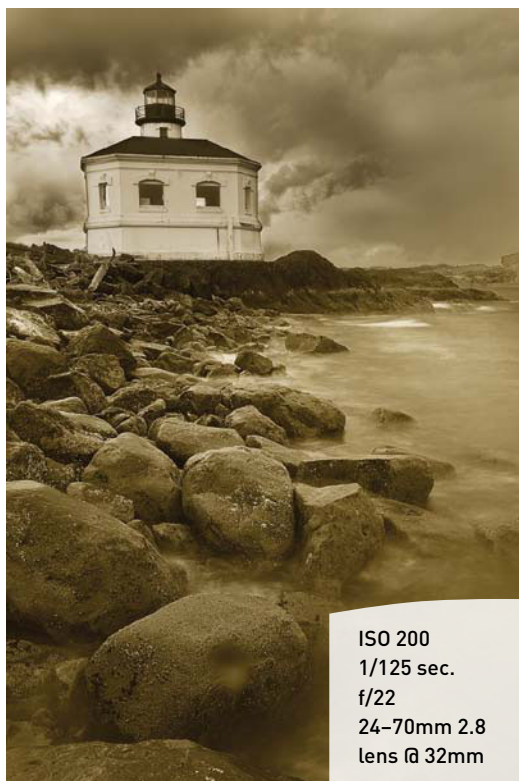
ISO 100  
1/15 sec.  
f/11  
24–70mm  
2.8 @ 24mm

# MY TOP TEN BASIC CAMERA SETTINGS

To take full advantage of my camera, I've customized it's menus to suit my shooting style. As a nature photographer, I need to be ready at a moment's notice to capture the action as it unfolds before me. The highest resolution possible is critical, as is the high performance of a fast camera. I am no stranger to shooting in low light and at high ISO settings when required to capture the moment, so low noise is important. Here are my basic camera settings on a D3; refer to your manual for your settings.

## 1. APERTURE PRIORITY

My camera's exposure mode is set to aperture priority (A/ AV) nearly all the time for the control it gives me over all aspects of making an image. By changing the aperture, I can control just how much of the image will be in focus and what will be out of focus (depth of field: **Figure 1.25**), which enables me to direct where the viewer's eye goes within the frame. The aperture I select in turn controls the shutter speed based on the light and ISO (**Figure 1.26**). I'll go into greater detail about aperture priority in Chapter 2, "Exposure Triangle."



**FIGURE 1.25**

A small aperture gives me great depth from foreground to background.

ISO 200  
1/125 sec.  
f/22  
24–70mm 2.8  
lens @ 32mm



**FIGURE 1.26**

Opening up the lens to a wider aperture results in a faster shutter speed to stop action.



## 2. CONTINUOUS FOCUS DYNAMIC

I have my camera set to Continuous AF Dynamic. I focus on the subject using a single focus point, and the camera uses the information from the selected focus point plus the surrounding 20 points to track a moving subject, keeping it in sharp focus, which allows me to concentrate on composition. As long as the subject stays within the target area, focus will remain locked on it.

## 3. CONTINUOUS HIGH ADVANCE

With my camera set at Continuous High Advance (nine frames per second), I can fire off a blistering sequence of frames (**Figure 1.27**), capturing peak of action.



**FIGURE 1.27**

As I tracked the yellow-crowned night heron stalking its breakfast, I saw it take off after a crab and simply depressed the shutter while panning the bird. As a result, I captured a sequence of images from the chase to the catch.

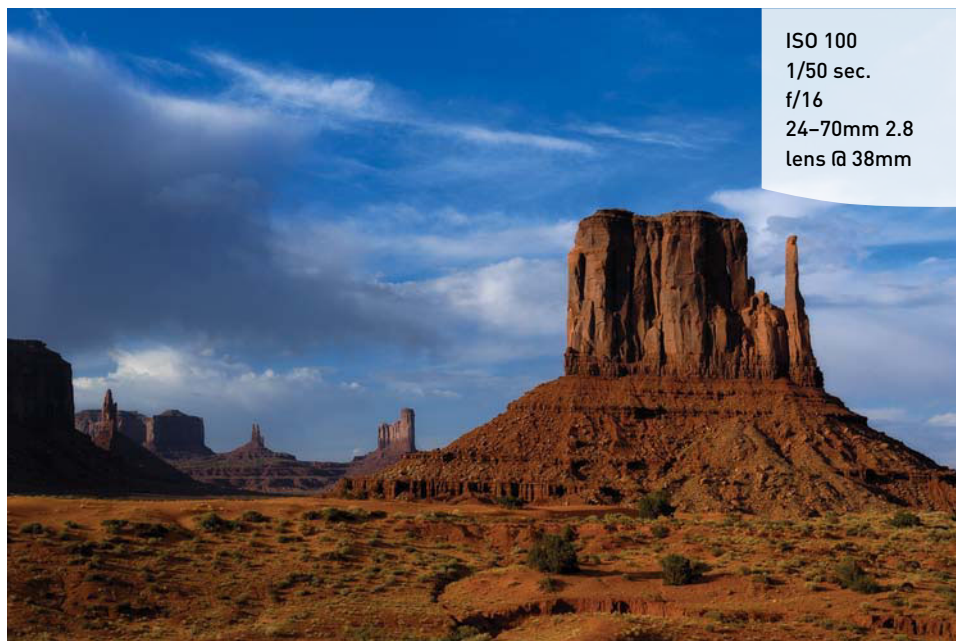


## 4. 3D MATRIX METERING

I rely on my camera's metering system to provide me with the technically correct exposure. The 1005 pixel 3D Matrix Metering (Evaluative Metering on Canon cameras) evaluates the scene, determines how much dark versus light area there is, compares the scene to a database of tens of thousands of images, and produces the best overall exposure for the given light values (**Figure 1.28**).

**FIGURE 1.28**

A five-stop range of light shows detail between the brightest area (clouds) and the darkest area (shadows on the Mittens).



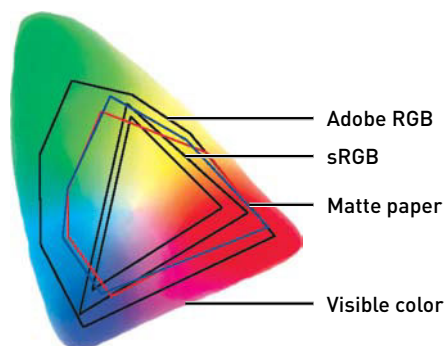
## 5. RAW VS. JPEG FORMAT

For the most information, resolution, and versatility, I have my cameras set to RAW + JPEG. RAW format gives me the greatest amount of tonal range and detail possible. I have the ability to make adjustments to exposure, white balance, and many other settings before processing the file, maintaining the highest quality and flexibility. RAW has tens of thousands of tonal values as opposed to JPEG's hundreds of tonal values. In addition, a RAW file has trillions of colors compared to a JPEG's mere millions. Is more always better? It depends on your final output needs. If I'm shooting an image strictly for the Web or to send via email, I may shoot in JPEG format because the file is processed instantly and is basically ready to send with little to no postprocessing necessary. When I want to squeeze every last drop of color, tone, and detail from the image, I'll use the RAW file format so I can tweak the file and do

additional creative processing in the digital darkroom. Once I have that finished file, I can convert it to JPEG for the Web or email, or I can output to large prints.

## 6. COLOR SPACE

Adobe RGB provides me with the largest color palette possible to work with (**Figure 1.29**). I have the ability to capture subtle gradations in colors with smooth transitions. Shooting in Adobe RGB gives me all the colors I need for print, and if I want to go to the Web, email, or an online lab, I simply convert to the appropriate profile after the fact. My finished images provide all the detail possible to go any which way I need.



**FIGURE 1.29**

The Adobe RGB color space offers the greatest range of color for even transitions between colors and shades of light to dark.

## 7. HIGHLIGHT WARNING

Highlight warning (affectionately called “blinkies”) gives me exposure information that helps me decide if any exposure corrections are needed at the point of capture (**Figure 1.30**). I set the blinkies to be active in the Playback menu. When I review my images, if there are areas that are blown out with no detail, the problem areas blink black>white>black>white repeatedly. With this information, I can determine whether or not I need to make any exposure adjustments.



**FIGURE 1.30**

I use blinkies to determine whether I have exposure issues to deal with.

## 8. FILE NUMBER SEQUENCE

On a good day I can easily shoot several cards. Later, in the digital darkroom while I am downloading images, if there are files with the same name, the computer will ask whether I want to overwrite the files. After a long tiring day, I may very well click the wrong button. With File number sequence turned On (Figure 1.31), the camera continues to consecutively number the images on the new card, avoiding any duplicate numbers from the previous card, and keeps me and my images in order.



**FIGURE 1.31**

Avoid overwriting images by turning the File number sequence to On!

## 9. AF-ON (AEL/AFL)

I use AF-ON to lock focus and exposure, leaving my camera set to Continuous mode to capture action at a moment's notice. But there are times when I don't have a focus point to select from based on my composition. Rather than reaching down and switching the camera to Manual (and possibly missing some action), I simply focus on the subject, hold down the AF-ON button, compose the frame to my liking, and fire away. As long as I hold the AF-ON (AEL/AFL) button, the focus will be locked. When the subject moves, I simply release the AF-ON button and go back to my normal continuous focus with tracking. Be sure to check your instruction manual to set this function.



## 10. ISO

I begin with my ISO at its lowest setting for greatest detail and lowest noise. I'll raise the ISO as needed to achieve the desired aperture/shutter speed combination.

As discussed earlier in the chapter, the ISO you set directly affects the aperture/shutter speed combination that you can select. Higher ISO allows you to shoot at faster shutter speeds in lower light or at smaller apertures, with noise being the trade-off. By selecting the lowest ISO you can get away with, you have the lowest noise possible in a given light situation. Even with the low-noise capabilities of today's cameras, I shoot at the lowest ISO I can for the highest resolution and clarity in my images.

If a higher ISO is required to achieve the effect you desire, by all means raise your ISO; a sharp, noisy photograph is better than a blurry image. It's a compromise that allows you to capture the image in low-light situations.

# Chapter 1 Assignments

The following assignments are designed to give you a better understanding of your equipment and how to set it up to suit your style of photography. Each subsequent chapter builds on the previous one, so be sure to stop at the end of each chapter and do the assignments, to build a strong foundation for making great shots.

### Equipment Inventory

Take a moment to look over your equipment. Does your camera offer you the performance you need for your photography style? Do your lenses cover the full range of focal lengths that you need to capture the image you see in your mind's eye? Do you have a spare battery, or two? Do you have enough memory to shoot for a day, a week, and so forth? Is your tripod stable enough to support your equipment? Make a list of the equipment you currently own, the gaps that need filling, and the equipment that will fill those gaps. This list will provide direction the next time you are in the market for a new camera, lens, accessory, and so on.

While you're examining your equipment, record all the serial numbers, purchase dates, and purchase costs. Then file away your inventory in the event you ever need it for insurance. You do have insurance, don't you?



## Basic Camera Settings

Dust off that instruction manual, grab your camera, and get comfortable so you can review all of your camera's buttons, dials, and menus. I know, I know, this is boring. But, believe me, you will thank me later. Familiarize yourself with the locations of important buttons and dials. Learn what the menus contain and file away that information in your memory for later in case you need to make changes. Set your camera's menus to suit your photographic style.

## Focal Length Exercise

**Part 1** This exercise will give you a good sense of the lenses you have and their ability to frame your subject. Set up your tripod at a location that has an interesting subject. Attach your widest lens, compose the photograph, and click. Repeat the process with each lens you have, shooting at the widest to the longest focal length of your zoom lenses from the same spot. Then compare the images to see how wide a shot your lens will capture compared to how tight it will frame up your subject.

**Compare** Compare the differences in focal lengths from a specific distance to see the coverage your lenses give you.

**Part 2** Using your tripod and the same lenses you used in Part 1, this time attach your longest lens first and compose a scene with a subject that fills the frame. Next, zooming out or changing lenses to the next longest, move forward until the subject fills the frame the same amount it did with the previous lens. Continue changing lenses and moving in closer with each change to fill the frame with the subject until you have used all your lenses.

**Compare** Compare the backgrounds in each image. The subject should be the same size in each frame, but the background will change based on the angle of view of the lens in use.

*Share your results with the book's Flickr group!*

*Join the group here: [flickr.com/groups/composition\\_fromsnapshotstogreatshots](https://www.flickr.com/groups/composition_fromsnapshotstogreatshots)*

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ISO 100  
1/13 sec  
f/8  
95mm lens



# Exposure Triangle

## **ISO, APERTURE AND SHUTTER SPEED, AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO EACH OTHER AND TO LIGHT**

Each and every image you make is influenced by light. Your camera meters the quality, quantity, and direction of the light, and provides you with exposure information that you can use to make images that represent your vision. Once you have the exposure information, it is up to you to decide what the best ISO, aperture, and shutter speed combination will best capture the mood of the scene you are photographing. I'll take each element of the exposure triangle, illustrate the effect of selecting the best aperture, shutter speed, and ISO for each image, and explain why.

For more on exposure, check out Jeff Revell's awesome book *Exposure: From Snapshots to Great Shots* (Peachpit, 2011).

## PORING OVER THE PICTURE

Setting my camera on a tripod allowed me to set my aperture to a small opening, yielding both great depth of field, from the frost-covered tree in the foreground to the falls beyond. It also resulted in a slow shutter speed to blur the water, giving it that silky look.

Keeping my ISO set to 100 was also instrumental in the slowness of the shutter speed. Understanding each element and its relationship to the others enabled me to control the final outcome of my image. With a gray, overcast sky and the monochromatic light, I planned on converting the image to black and white when I finished it.

A slow shutter speed blurred  
the water, emphasizing the  
feeling of motion.

---

A small aperture enabled me  
to capture sharp focus from  
foreground to background.

---

ISO 100  
1/6 sec  
f/22  
70mm lens



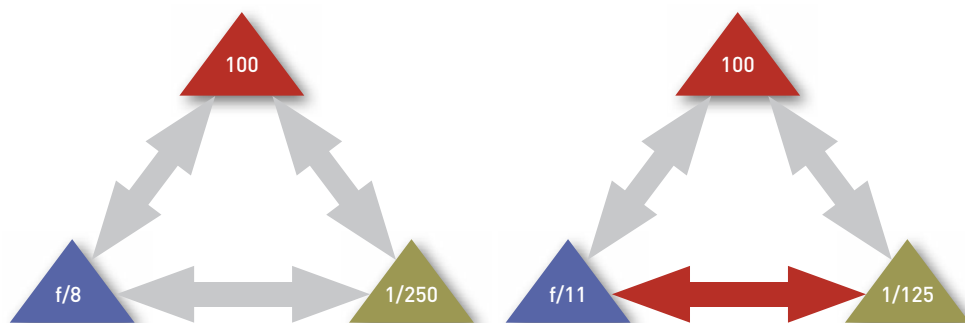
**PORING OVER THE PICTURE**



## UNDERSTANDING THE EXPOSURE TRIANGLE

For every exposure, there are at least six different combinations available that will give you the same exposure value. But in many cases, each combination produces radically different effects, from a sharp subject and soft background (shallow depth of field) to everything from near to infinity in sharp focus (great depth of field). Your shutter speed controls stop-action or blur-motion, and the ISO controls the camera meter's sensitivity to light with high ISO settings for low light and low ISO for higher resolution and low noise.

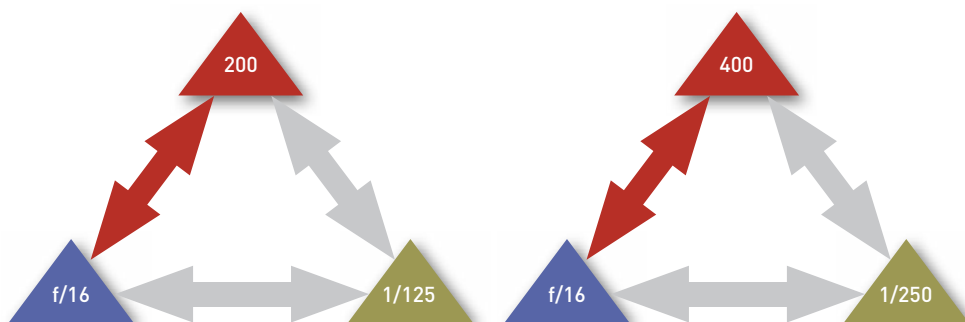
If any one element in the exposure triangle changes, the other settings will be affected. Using the Exposure Triangle in **Figure 2.1** as a starting point, let's look at the results of changing our settings:



**FIGURE 2.1**

The Exposure Triangle with a basic exposure on a partly sunny day: ISO is set to 100, aperture is set to f/8, and the resulting shutter speed is 1/250 sec.

ET 100 ISO, f/11 at 1/125 sec. Changing my aperture from f/8 to f/11 causes my shutter speed to slow from 1/250 sec to 1/125 sec.



ET 200 ISO, f/16 at 1/125 sec. If I need a faster shutter speed, I increase the ISO to 200 to keep 1/125 sec.

ET 400 ISO, f/16 at 1/250 sec. If I find that I need an even faster shutter speed, increasing my ISO to 400 gives me 1/250 sec at f/16.

## ISO

ISO is the camera sensor's sensitivity to light. The lower the number (100, 200, etc.), the brighter the light you need to make a correct exposure. If there is bright light and you can keep your ISO at its lowest setting, the result will be ultrafine detail, high resolution, and low noise. You have the capabilities to change from one ISO to another from frame to frame. With today's low-noise cameras, you may wonder why it's important to control the ISO rather than simply dialing it up to a higher setting and shooting away. Although it's true that cameras have lower noise, I still want the least noise possible, and I want the creative control changing my ISO affords me. Selecting the ISO is the first step I take when making an exposure decision (**Figure 2.2**).



**FIGURE 2.2**

With my camera mounted on a tripod, and a stationary subject, I was able to dial my ISO to its lowest setting and the aperture to its smallest opening. This gave me the highest resolution, lowest-noise image, with the greatest depth of field possible.

High ISO (800, 1600, etc.), on the other hand, allows me to shoot in lower light. I can shoot at higher shutter speeds or smaller apertures when I adjust my ISO to a higher setting. A result of a higher ISO setting is noise (noise is that rainbow of colorful specks that appear on your image when you shoot at high ISO or long exposures), but if raising the ISO enables me to get a shot I wouldn't be able to capture otherwise (**Figure 2.3**), I'll take the added noise and deal with it by using noise-reduction software when I process my image. This is one of the many compromises you will be faced with when deciding the best exposure settings for a given image.

### FIGURE 2.3

With the light nearly gone, I had to raise my ISO to 3200 to capture the bobcat preening on a log. Without the ability to raise my ISO, I would not have been able to make this image.



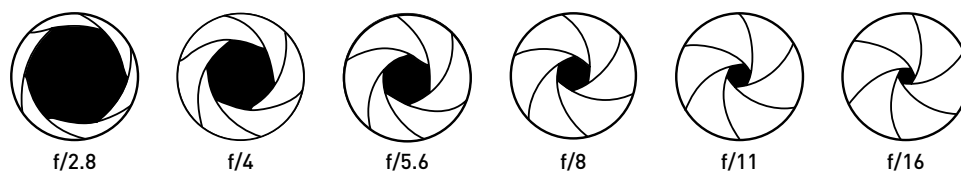
In each of the preceding scenarios, the exposure value (the light falling on the sensor) is exactly the same, but the end result can be very dramatic depending on the combination you choose.

## ISO

- Low ISO has higher resolution, requires more light or a wider aperture, or a slower shutter speed.
- High ISO has more noise, requires less light or a smaller aperture, or a faster shutter speed.

## APERTURE

The aperture value is the size of the lens opening (called the f-stop). The aperture is the opening in the lens that allows light to pass through to the sensor (**Figure 2.4**).



**FIGURE 2.4**  
An aperture chart.

Aperture is a big factor in controlling depth of field and is the setting that confuses people the most. The smaller the number (1.4, 2.8), the wider the opening (**Figure 2.5**); the wider the opening, the more light the lens allows through the diaphragm. Wider apertures give less depth of field and result in faster shutter speeds (**Figure 2.6**).

With overcast skies and the possibility of some action, I dialed up my ISO to 800 and set the lens to a fairly wide aperture to be able to stop the action when this coyote leapt into the air to pounce on a mouse (**Figure 2.7**).



## FIGURE 2.5

A wide aperture has less depth of field; think small number equals shallow depth of field.

ISO 200  
1/1500 sec  
f/5.6  
600mm lens





ISO 200  
1/1500 sec  
f/8  
600mm lens

**FIGURE 2.6**

Wide apertures also allow in more light, enabling you to shoot at a faster shutter speed (more on that coming right up) and stop the action.



ISO 800  
1/500 sec  
f/6.7  
600mm lens

**FIGURE 2.7**

It took a fast ISO and shutter speed to capture this action. The resulting wide aperture blurred any detail in the background.

## DEPTH OF FIELD

Depth of field is the area within the frame that appears in acceptably sharp focus. Increased depth of field is achieved by using a small aperture (a big number, for example,  $f/11$ ,  $f/16$ , etc.). Less depth of field happens when the lens is opened to a wider aperture (a small number, for example,  $f/1.4$ ,  $f/2.8$ , etc.).

In contrast, the larger the number, the smaller the lens opening. The smaller the opening, the less light the lens allows through the diaphragm, with a slow shutter speed as a result (**Figures 2.8 and 2.9**).

### FIGURE 2.8

A small aperture (big number) provides more depth of field; think big equals more.







**FIGURE 2.9**  
A small aperture (big number) with its small opening results in a slower shutter speed. (It takes light longer to pass through a small hole.)

ISO 100  
1.5 sec  
f/22  
110mm lens

A small aperture requires either a slower shutter speed or a faster ISO. To achieve the blurred motion look of the water in **Figure 2.10**, I closed down the aperture and left the ISO at a low setting.

### FIGURE 2.10

Here I achieved the blurred motion of the water and depth of field from the near foreground to infinity.



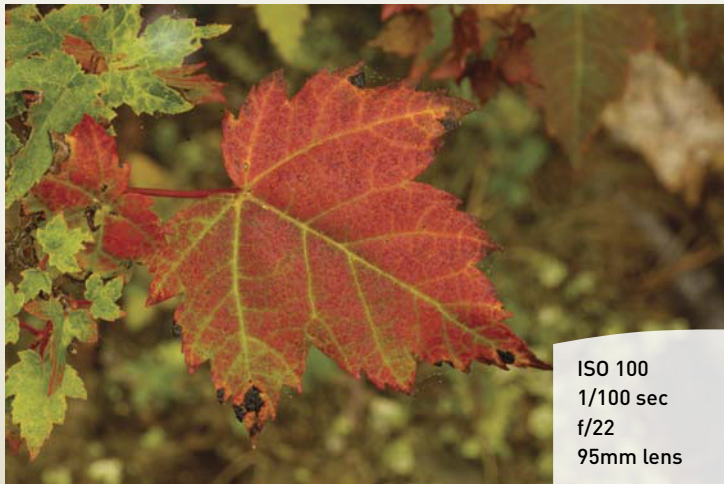
## RECAP APERTURE

- The larger the opening, the smaller the number; the smaller the number, the shallower the depth of field and the faster the shutter speed (**Figure 2.11**).
- The smaller the opening, the larger the number; the larger the number, the greater depth of field and the slower the shutter speed (**Figure 2.12**).



**FIGURE 2.11**

A wide aperture allowed me to focus on the leaf, throwing the background into a colorful blur.



**FIGURE 2.12**

Closing down the aperture to f/22 made the background busy and distracting without bringing it into sharp focus.

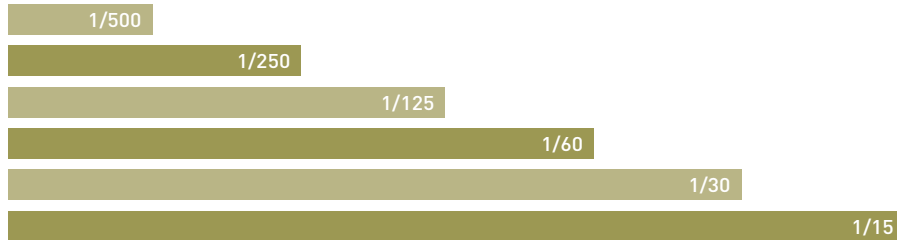


## SHUTTER SPEED

The shutter speed is the length of time the shutter is open to allow the light to pass through the aperture to the sensor (**Figure 2.13**). Shutter speeds control stop action and blur-motion (**Figure 2.14**). I usually set the ISO and aperture, and let the camera select the shutter speed, knowing that I have the ability to override the shutter speed by changing the aperture.

**FIGURE 2.13**

A Shutter Speed chart.



**FIGURE 2.14**

Fast shutter speeds stop action, freezing any movement in the process. The body position of the eagle as well as the fast shutter speed gives this image a sense of stop-action.



### FAST SHUTTER SPEEDS

Fast shutter speeds require a lot of light, a wide aperture, a high ISO, or a combination thereof.

Slow shutter speeds blur movement, giving a sense of slow motion. The blurred wingtips of a bird in flight and the soft cotton candy of moving water are both effects of slow shutter speeds (**Figure 2.15**).



**FIGURE 2.15**

To capture the sharp eye and blurred wings of the sandhill crane in flight required good panning skills because I had to shoot at a slow shutter speed to blur the wings, and pan (follow) at the same rate as the bird was moving to keep the eye sharp.

### **SLOW SHUTTER SPEEDS**

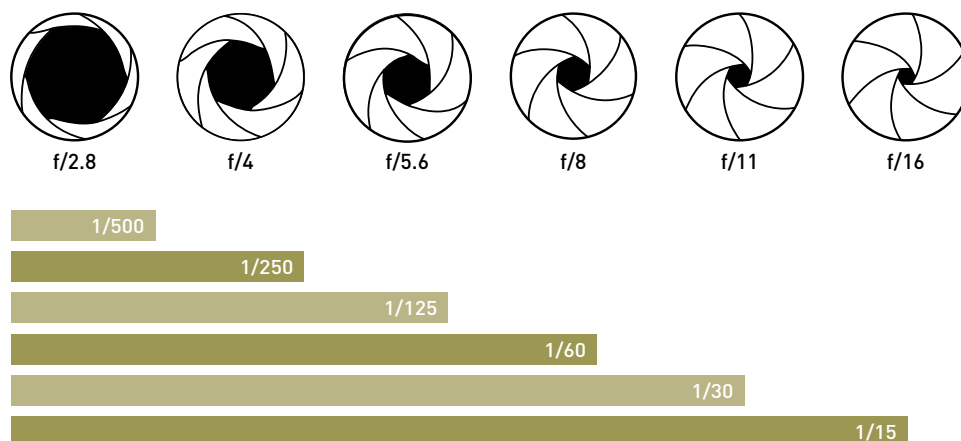
Slow shutter speeds are achieved in low light, at a closed-down aperture, a low ISO, or with a combination thereof.

## **APERTURE/SHUTTER SPEED RELATIONSHIP**

The aperture I select directly affects the shutter speed the camera selects (**Figure 2.16**). I shoot in aperture priority mode most of the time. If I want a fast shutter speed, I simply turn the aperture to a wider opening to produce a faster shutter speed with a resulting shallower depth of field. If I want to blur motion, I turn the aperture dial to a smaller opening; the resulting slow shutter speeds create a blurred effect.

**FIGURE 2.16**

The Aperture/ Shutter Speed chart illustrates the relationship of the size of the aperture to the duration of the shutter speed.



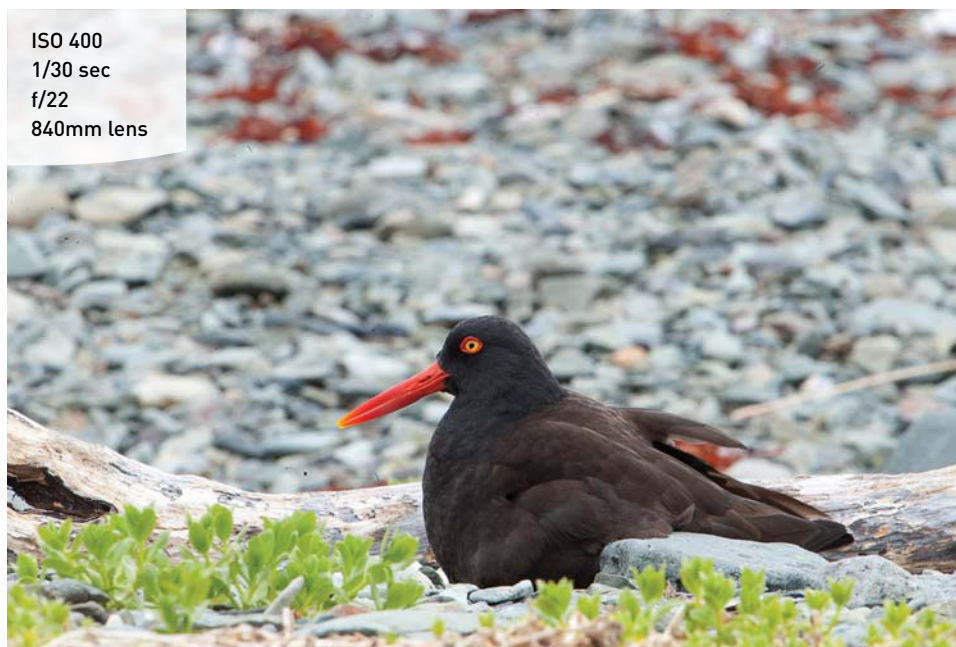
**Figure 2.17** shows an image with a slightly overcast sky. The light was flat, eliminating any shadows, with soft diffused light. The subject was not moving so I was able to keep the ISO down without concern for shutter speed and with an aperture of f/5.6 (wide open on a 600mm with a TC-14E 1.4X teleconverter).

**FIGURE 2.17**

Here I was able to make the background a soft blur, directing the viewer's attention to the American oystercatcher. A high ISO plus a wide aperture equal a shallow depth of field.



In **Figure 2.18**, closing down the aperture to f/22 resulted in the shutter speed slowing down to 1/30 sec, which didn't really matter. With a proper long lens technique and a relatively still subject, I could shoot at the slower shutter speed.



ISO 400  
1/30 sec  
f/22  
840mm lens

**FIGURE 2.18**

With a slower shutter speed, I increased the depth of field, giving the background a textured look to it.

With my camera in aperture-priority mode, I photographed a waterfall, beginning with my ISO at 100, an aperture of f/8, and a shutter speed of 1/180 sec (**Figure 2.19A**). Closing down the aperture to f/11 slowed the shutter speed to 1/90 sec (**Figure 2.19B**). An aperture of f/16 gave me a shutter speed of 1/45 sec (**Figure 2.19C**). And at f/22 the shutter speed was 1/20 sec (**Figure 2.19D**), which was the slowest shutter speed I could get; my aperture was closed down as far as it would go, and my ISO was at its slowest. A shutter speed of 1/20 sec still wasn't giving me the look I wanted, so I reached into my bag and pulled out my Vari-ND (see the "Accessories" section in Chapter 1). Threading it onto my lens, I rotated the front ring until I was able to shoot at one second, giving me the blurred motion and silky look that I was after (**Figure 2.20**).

### FIGURE 2.19

All four images are the same exposure but use a different combination of aperture and shutter speeds to get a different effect with the moving water.



A. 100 ISO, f/8 at 1/180 sec



B. 100 ISO, f/11 at 1/90 sec



C. 100 ISO, f/16 at 1/45 sec



D. 100 ISO, f/22 at 1/20 sec

### FIGURE 2.20

Variable neutral density allows me to shoot at slow shutter speeds in bright light (a two- to eight-stop reduction in exposure).





Part of composition is telling your story in a way that the viewer will understand without your being there to explain it. Composition includes depth of field, which is mainly controlled by aperture; motion, which is controlled by shutter speed; light; and how you handle exposure to control the path your viewer's eyes take through your image. By combining the information you learned in Chapter 1 and in this chapter, you now have the basic the foundation that will start you on your journey toward better storytelling through lens selection, camera settings (aperture/shutter speed/ISO), and exposure, and their roles in the outcome of your images. Take some time to complete a few assignments before moving on, to make sure you have a good grasp of this very important element in your photography.

## Chapter 2 Assignments

After finishing the first two chapters and completing the following assignments, you should have a basic understanding of the equipment in your bag and of how to navigate your camera's buttons and dials, as well a better understanding of the exposure triangle and how to use ISO, aperture, and shutter speed to make your images “speak” to their viewers.

### ISO Test

Find a subject to photograph indoors without a flash and set your camera on a tripod so each image will be composed identically. Set your lens to about f/5.6 or f/8 (aperture priority) and then cycle through the different ISO settings, from your lowest 100/200 to your highest 1600/3200+. Review the images on your computer and compare the noise levels at different ISO settings. This will give you a comfort zone as to how high you feel you can set your ISO to get the shot.

### Aperture Test

Try to find a scene with a foreground, middle-ground, and background element (preferably a stationary subject). Set your camera on your tripod and compose the image to your liking. Focus about a third to halfway into the scene, set your ISO relatively low (you're using a tripod), set your camera to aperture priority, and cycle through the aperture settings, letting the shutter speed fall where it will. Review the images on your computer screen to see the difference the aperture makes in depth of field.

Try the same assignment again two more times, first cycling through your aperture settings with your subject close to the background and then with your subject farther from the background, to compare the role of distance of subject to background and depth of field.

Using the same lens and same aperture setting, shoot the same subject from different distances to see how distance to subject affects depth of field.



Using all the lenses you have, starting with the longest lens, compose a recognizable image within the frame and click, zoom back, or change lenses to your next longest and move forward until your subject fills the same amount of the frame that it did with the longer lens. Leaving the aperture the same in each shot, continue changing lenses to wider angles and moving in closer to your subject to get the same image size.

Compare all four situations, and review the EXIF data to see the effect the different situations have on depth of field.

### Shutter-Speed Test

Find a few moving subjects—moving water in a stream or a waterfall, moving cars (be careful), birds in flight, or anything that you can repeatedly photograph at different shutter speeds.

You'll be comparing the effect of different shutter speeds on the feeling of stop-action or blur-motion. Mount your camera on a tripod and compose the image. Leaving the ISO the same, begin at your lens's widest aperture and keep clicking at each stop. As you begin to close down the aperture to a smaller opening, notice the effect of the small aperture on your shutter speed. This is one test for which you need the tripod for support as much as for accuracy of the test.

*Share your results with the book's Flickr group!*

*Join the group here: [flickr.com/groups/composition\\_fromsnapshottogreatshots](https://www.flickr.com/groups/composition_fromsnapshottogreatshots)*

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ISO 100  
1/90 sec.  
f/11  
55mm lens



# Light

## **LIGHT IS THE KEY ELEMENT IN IMAGE MAKING!**

Without light, there would be no photographs. In fact, the word photography means “drawing with light.” Light has quality, quantity, color, and direction, which provide shape, texture, and character to your images. There is a reason that I get up at 0’dark thirty while most people in the world are still tucked snugly in their warm beds. I drive in the predawn hours to arrive at a location that is cloaked in darkness. I set up my camera in the dark, using a flashlight to make sure my ISO and aperture are adjusted to my liking as I prepare to make my first image of the day. It’s up to me to choose the best settings to enhance the quality of light.

## PORING OVER THE PICTURE

ISO 200  
1/200 sec.  
f/16  
75mm lens





**PORING OVER THE PICTURE**

ISO 200  
1/6 sec.  
f/8  
160mm lens

## THE QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF LIGHT

Photography is all about chasing the light. The light you chase has quality and quantity. It's the quality and quantity of light that I look for in my photographs. The rich, warm tones of sunrise or sunset, the deep blue of twilight, the diffused colors of an overcast day, or the harsh shadows of midday all play a big part in the end result of my images. Understanding light will make you a better photographer.

### SUNRISE AND SUNSET: THE GOLDEN HOURS

It's anticipation of the quality of light a beautiful sunrise bestows upon the landscape that pulls me from my warm bed, or the quality of light at sunset that keeps me out shooting during the dinner hour. While the sun is low on the horizon, bathing the world in its warm glow, the exposure is well within the five-stop range that my sensor needs to capture detail in both the shadows and highlights (**Figure 3.1**). If I turn 180 degrees, I can photograph into the sun using the bright, colorful light as a background for an interesting silhouette (**Figure 3.2**). During the first hours of daylight, the light is low, necessitating the need for a tripod for stability or to increase the ISO enough to achieve a shutter speed fast enough to hand hold the camera. The choice is yours—greater detail versus greater noise.

**FIGURE 3.1**

Sunrise at Highland Lighthouse, Cape Cod. Mounting my camera on a tripod allowed me to select an aperture that would yield enough depth of field to render the lighthouse in sharp focus without my worrying about the resulting slow shutter speed.





**FIGURE 3.2**  
Facing towards the sunrise, Peggy's Cove Lighthouse becomes a silhouette. Dialing in  $-1$  exposure compensation darkened the lighthouse and people to black and increased the saturation of the sunset colors. Using a tripod helped to stabilize my camera with its slow shutter speed. I had to wait for the people to hold still to capture them without any movement.

Quality of light is fleeting. Every February in Yosemite National Park, there is a phenomenon that lasts for about two weeks. The conditions have to be just right, with no clouds to block the sun and enough water flowing over Horsetail Falls. As the sun begins to set, the angle of light throws the canyon wall into darkness and light hits the falls, lighting them as if they were on fire (**Figure 3.3**). Talk about quality of light!

## MIDDAY

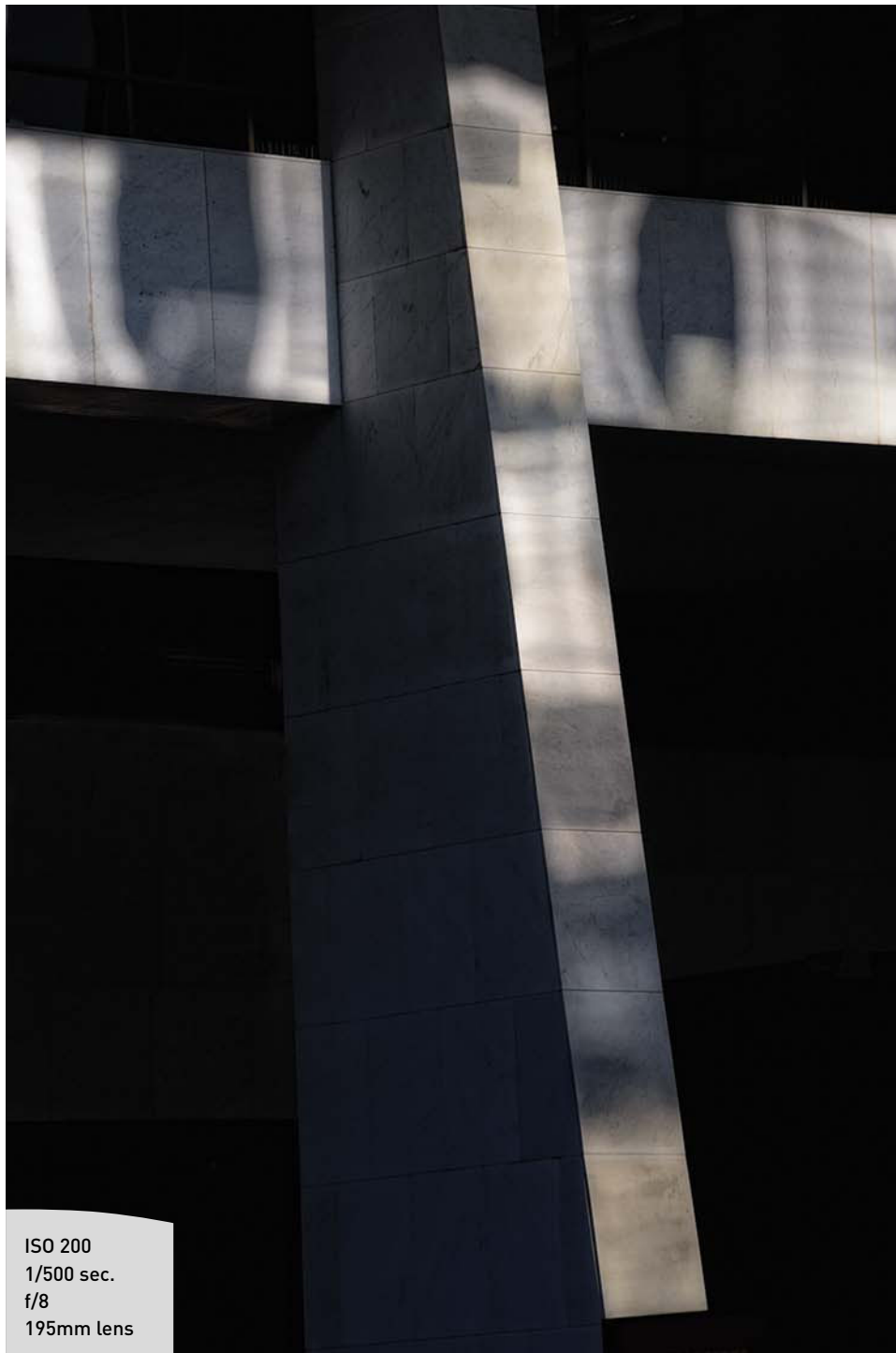
As the sun rises higher in the sky, the *quantity* of light increases, the warmth of first light fades away, and the contrast between shadow and light becomes greater. The brighter light, as the sun moves higher in the sky, means that I can shoot at a faster shutter speed or a smaller aperture without the need to increase my ISO (see “Understanding the Exposure Triangle,” in Chapter 2). As the light gets brighter and the contrast between shadow and light increases, rather than putting away my camera, I look to the shadows as backdrops for graphic elements (**Figure 3.4**).

### FIGURE 3.3

The setting sun casts its light towards Horsetail Falls, illuminating it as if it were on fire. Shooting wide open to keep a faster shutter speed was necessary because I was hand-holding my camera. A -1 stop of light darkened the rock wall, enhancing the light on the falls.



ISO 100  
1/180 sec.  
f/ 2.8  
200mm lens



ISO 200  
1/500 sec.  
f/8  
195mm lens

#### FIGURE 3.4

Midday light, with its hard shadows, turns objects into graphic elements. The sun acts like a point source of light on sunny days, throwing shadows into the mix for added drama. I tend to dial in minus exposure compensation to darken the shadows, making them a deep black that makes a nice contrast against a lit subject. Minus exposure compensation darkened the shadows, making the column stand out.



Slot canyons are best photographed at midday, when the sun is high in the sky. The light works its way into the canyon through a slim opening, bouncing from one red wall to the other, bringing out the colors of the sandstone (Figure 3.5).

### FIGURE 3.5

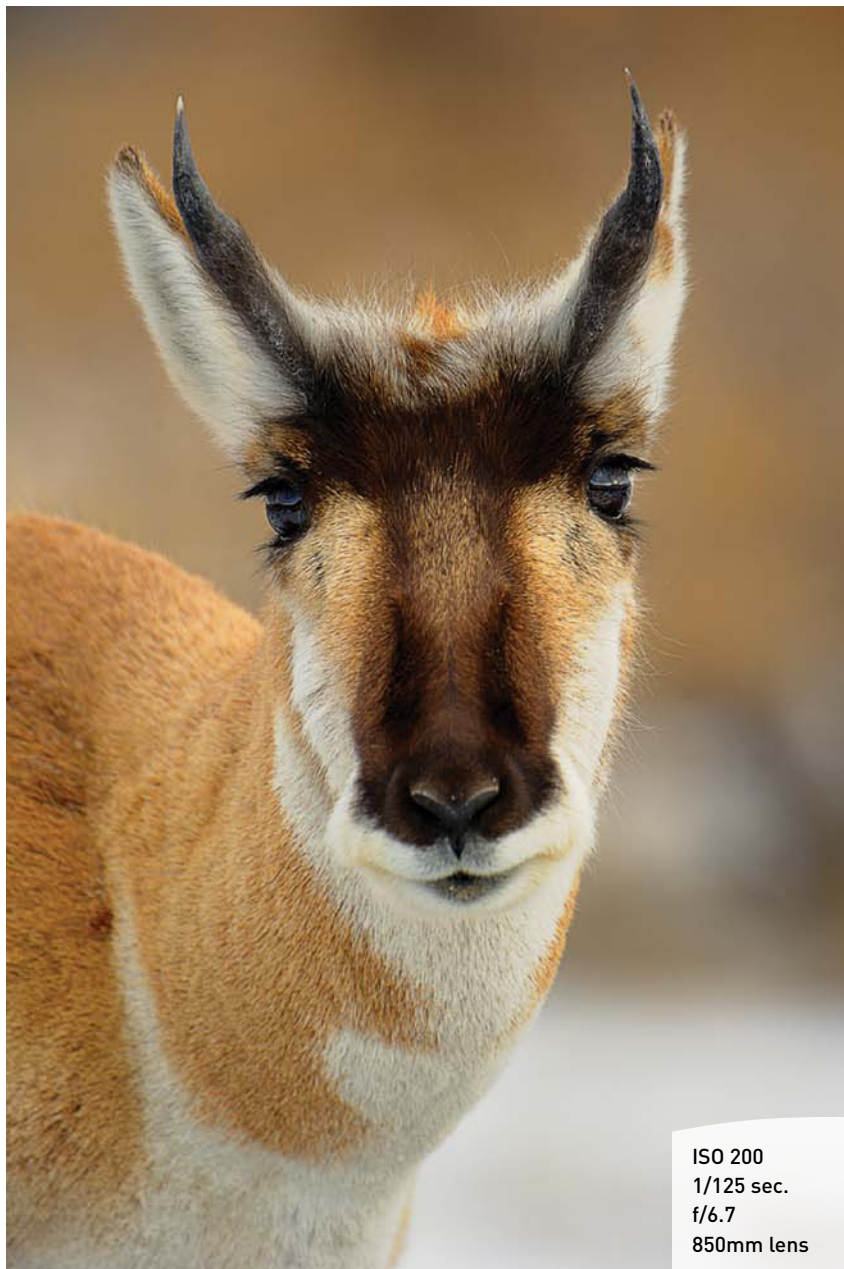
Midday light, Upper Antelope Canyon, Arizona. With the sun directly overhead, light penetrates into the deep canyon, bouncing off the walls and turning them to a rich, warm color. Dust falls from above into the slot canyons, and the light bounces off the dust creating God beams. Minus exposure compensation increased the visibility of the shaft of light against the saturated colors of the canyon walls.



ISO 100  
2.2 sec.  
f/22  
35mm lens

## DIFFUSED, OVERCAST LIGHT

Overcast days light the landscape as if there was a giant softbox in the sky. Without shadows and contrast, the light is flat, with more detail visible. I like overcast days when photographing mammals, birds, people, flowers, and water (**Figure 3.6**).



**FIGURE 3.6**

Diffused light brings out the details in mammals' fur. Adding a 1.4X teleconverter to my 600mm lens enabled me to fill the frame with the pronghorn's head. A tripod allowed me to shoot wide open at 1/125 of a second, with my ISO set to 200 to avoid noise.

ISO 200  
1/125 sec.  
f/6.7  
850mm lens

As the day wears on, the sun begins its descent and the shadows grow long once again; it's the light that keeps me out shooting until the last rays of sun are gone. And if I'm lucky and the photo gods cooperate, I'll keep shooting, capturing the blue cast of twilight (Figure 3.7).

### FIGURE 3.7

Twilight at Heceta Head Lighthouse, Oregon. Long after the sun has set, the sea fog begins to roll in, making the light more prominent in the dark.



## CHANGING LIGHT

Light is constantly changing. Different times of the day reveal different elements in a subject. The late afternoon light shines on the Golden Gate Bridge, bringing attention to the famous red structure (Figure 3.8).

As the sun drops below the horizon, the light disappears from the bridge. The image takes on the cool colors of evening (Figure 3.9).



ISO 200  
1/125 sec.  
f/8  
29mm lens

**FIGURE 3.8**

Late afternoon light illuminates the Golden Gate Bridge. With the camera mounted on a tripod, I was able to photograph the same subject at different times of the day, into the evening, illustrating the difference in light over a few hours time.



ISO 200  
3 sec.  
f/8  
29mm lens

**FIGURE 3.9**

The sun drops below the horizon, plunging the Golden Gate Bridge into darkness.



In the evening, artificial lights illuminate the Golden Gate once again, brightening the red of the bridge. A long exposure with moving cars on the bridge added light streaks, which produced the feeling of motion (**Figure 3.10**).

**FIGURE 3.10**

Evening approaches and the bridge is lit once again, causing the bright red to stand out against the dark blue sky.



## DIRECTION OF LIGHT

Light has three directions in relationship to the camera. The way light falls on my subject determines how I will set my exposure. Front-lit subjects are easy to expose. With no contrast or shadows to deal with, the exposure is well within the range the sensor can handle, so I simply compose and click. Backlight is the opposite of front light, with the light coming from behind the subject, casting it into silhouette. Sidelight adds drama, texture, and shape to an image.

### FRONT LIGHT

Front light lacks shadows. Consequently, it lacks the texture, shape, or dimension of sidelight or backlight. It is, however, a very easy exposure to make. Simply meter your scene, and choose the best exposure combination to suit your subject. With a simple click, you have a nice image. Using a fisheye to photograph Emerald Pool in Yellowstone National Park with front light reveals a glimpse into the depth of

the pool (**Figure 3.11**). The lack of shadows reveals the detail in the feathers of a tricolored heron pausing to preen (**Figure 3.12**). Selecting a wide aperture renders the heron in sharp focus and softens the background, making the subject pop.



**FIGURE 3.11**  
Emerald Pool, Yellowstone National Park.



**FIGURE 3.12**  
Tricolored heron preening, with front light showing the details in its feathers.

## BACKLIGHT

Backlighting (shooting towards the light source) turns your subject into a silhouette. Images that have an interesting shape and form make great subjects when I'm photographing into the sun. The mood of a backlit scene varies depending on how I handle the exposure. Because my camera can't handle the exposure range between shadow and light in a backlit scene, I use the shadows to accentuate the shape of a familiar landmark, the Mittens in Monument Valley. By positioning myself so the sun was partially blocked by the formation, and closing down my aperture to its smallest

setting of f/22, I was able to add a creative starburst to the pinpoint of sunlight (Figure 3.13). With the knowledge that I would get a starburst effect from shooting into the sun with a small aperture, I took creative license with my fisheye lens to capture a person for scale (more on scale in Chapter 6), backlit against the North Window in Arches National Park (Figure 3.14). The scatter of light added creative lens flare (which normally is something I try to avoid).

### FIGURE 3.13

The rising sun backlights the Mittens, in Monument Valley, Arizona.



### FIGURE 3.14

Backlit photographer with creative lens flare.





## SIDELIGHT

Sidelight occurs when you are positioned at a right angle to the light source, working the shadows to define shape, form, and texture. The contrast of shadow and light adds a three-dimensional feeling to a two-dimensional image. The simplicity and lack of color in the image of a lighthouse window made for a very high-contrast, graphic look (Figure 3.15).



**FIGURE 3.15**

Sidelight adds shape, form, and texture to the lighthouse window.

Using sidelight for dramatic effect, I turned my lens on an alligator as it lifted its head out of the water. With only a moment to capture this image before the alligator dropped back into the depths of the lake, I had to act quickly. Knowing how my camera would react to the light, I was able to make a split-second exposure decision and capture the fleeting moment. The water acted as a reflector, bouncing light up into the alligator's face (Figure 3.16). The exposure range was too great to capture detail in the shadows, emphasizing the alligator's teeth and eye, which is where I want the viewer's eye to travel within the frame. Just like the lens you select decides what you include as much as what you exclude in your frame, shadow and light further enhance this effect. By excluding part of the alligator's face, the sense of drama and mystery is increased.

**FIGURE 3.16**

Water acts as a natural reflector, bouncing light up into the alligator's face.



## EXPOSURE COMPENSATION

Exposure compensation gives me creative control of my exposure. I rely on my camera's meter to give me the best overall exposure for a given scene. Once I have my base exposure, I need to decide on the mood I am trying to capture. I choose among several aperture, shutter speed, and ISO settings. I also have the ability to take control of my exposure and override the camera for dramatic effect.

Window light is a wonderful source of light. In **Figure 3.17** I asked Donald to stand at an angle to the window, controlling the direction the light traveled across his face. Shadow and light gave Donald's face shape and form that front light would have eliminated. By dialing in  $-1\frac{1}{2}$  exposure compensation, I increased the shadows, which in turn accentuated the character in Donald's face. Donald, a seasoned model, was able to hold very still, which gave me the ability to keep my ISO low to avoid noise and still shoot hand-held at 1/30 sec. with my lens wide open. With a very shallow depth of field, it was essential that Donald's eye remain in sharp focus. Using my 200mm lens, I composed a tight head-and-shoulders portrait of Donald.

Donald's face lent itself to the dramatic lighting, whereas the same effect would not flatter a lovely woman. Knowing light and what works best with different subjects enabled me to capture two distinctly different looks. In **Figure 3.18** I used the window light again. But this time the window was a wall of glass, which increased the size of the light source and created a much softer, brighter, more airy feeling to the portrait of my friend Leila. In this case I dialed in  $+\frac{1}{2}$  exposure compensation to add to the bright feel. Wanting to show Leila in her home environment, I used a 90mm focal length to include more of her surroundings.



**FIGURE 3.17**

Using window light and having Donald turn at an angle to the window enhanced the character of his wonderful face.



**FIGURE 3.18**

Using a larger source of light added to the bright airy feeling.

Knowing how my meter will react to a given light situation, I dialed in +1 exposure compensation on this kittiwake against a white sky to achieve a high-key look (**Figure 3.19**). Had I gone with the reading my camera gave me, I would have ended up with an image that was darker and moodier, with less detail on the bird. Using my camera's Highlight Warning (see "My Top Ten Basic Camera Settings," in Chapter 1), I could see that the sky was blown out without detail. In this case I chose to accept the blown-out sky to create the effect I was after.

### FIGURE 3.19

Dialing in plus exposure compensation gave this kittiwake image a high key look.



Photographing roseate spoonbills in Tampa Bay with front light against the darker mangrove trees caused my Highlight Warnings to blink, warning me of overexposure with no detail on the bird. I dialed in  $-1$  exposure compensation to capture the detail in the spoonbill, which in turn darkened the background to nearly black, causing the spoonbill to stand out dramatically (Figure 3.20).



**FIGURE 3.20**

Dialing in minus exposure compensation gave me a proper exposure of the roseate spoonbill.

# Chapter 3 Assignments

With a greater understanding of light, you will have much more control over the outcome of your images. Remember that light is the single most important element in your photographs. How you work with the light and your exposures directly relates to whether your images will look the way you visualize them.

## Quality and Quantity of Light

Find a subject close to your home that you can revisit over the course of several days at different times. Photograph the subject under different light conditions to see the effects light has on the mood and character of your subject. Shoot at sunrise, sunset, midday, twilight, and on an overcast day. Then compare the images to see the effects the light has on the subject. Review your exposures and study the EXIF data to see how your settings changed at different times of day based on the quantity of light.

## Direction of Light

Once again, you will need to stretch this assignment over a few days to be able to see the change in the direction of light. Select a few subjects that you can photograph from several angles so you can compare the direction of light and how it affects your subject. Begin with front lighting. Move around so the light is behind your subject and take another photograph. Then shoot your subject with the light coming from the side. Compare the results to see what effect the direction of light has on your subject.

## Exposure Compensation

If you have a bracket setting on your camera, you can use it for this assignment. With your camera mounted on a tripod, shoot a sequence of at least five photographs beginning with the metered value followed by a shot at -1 exposure compensation and then -2 exposure compensation. Then dial in +1 and +2, and shoot at each exposure setting. Compare the results to see the effect of darkening the image and adding drama or lightening the subject to make it feel brighter.

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ISO 100  
30 sec.  
f/22  
42mm lens



# Lines, Shapes, and Patterns

## **LINES, SHAPES, AND PATTERNS MAKE UP THE VISUAL PATH THAT LEADS YOUR EYE THROUGH THE FRAME TO THE POINT OF INTEREST**

Composition is the art of arranging the elements within your frame into a pleasing image. It's up to you to determine what your subject is and to arrange the elements within the frame accordingly. Lines and shapes are important elements in composition. Lines draw your viewer into (or out of) the frame. They give direction. An S-curve (a curve that is shaped like an S) gently meanders through the frame, leading the viewer deeper into the frame, whereas a straight line is more direct. Curved lines are soft; straight lines have a more rigid feel.

Do you use a straight line or a diagonal line to reach the subject? Both will take the viewer there, but each has a different impact. Merging lines create a sense of distance, or vanishing point. Shapes are the result of a series of lines that come together to form a circle, square, triangle, and so on. Just like lines, the shape of your subject creates its own dynamic whether it's round, square, triangular, free-form, and so forth. Lines often lead to shapes, giving your images form. Patterns are repeating lines and shapes that make up an image.

## PORING OVER THE PICTURE

Lines and shapes come together to create graphic elements in a photograph. The Conservatory of Flowers in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park is a perfect subject to illustrate lines (both straight and diagonal), shapes, and form all in one image.

The soft shape of the clouds \_\_\_\_\_  
contrasts nicely with the  
hard lines and shapes of the  
building.

The many converging lines \_\_\_\_\_  
within the image create a  
multitude of shapes—square,  
rectangle, triangle, curves.

I found that converting the \_\_\_\_\_  
image to black and white  
made an even stronger  
graphic photograph.

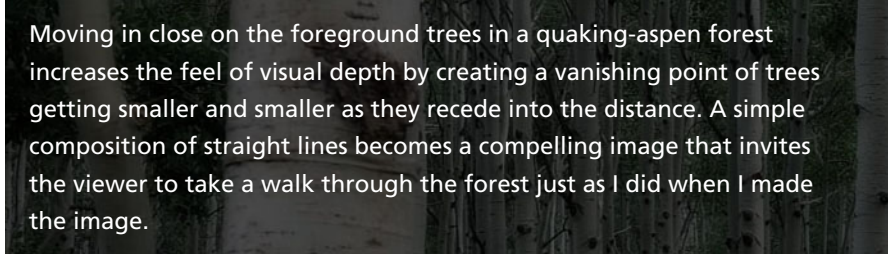
A series of lines draws the viewer's eye through the \_\_\_\_\_  
photograph beginning in the lower left (1) and leading  
diagonally to a vertical line moving upwards (2)  
towards the next horizontal line moving to the left (3)  
and continuing on throughout the frame.




ISO 100  
1/200 sec.  
f/8  
32mm lens

## PORING OVER THE PICTURE

Moving in close on the foreground trees in a quaking-aspen forest increases the feel of visual depth by creating a vanishing point of trees getting smaller and smaller as they recede into the distance. A simple composition of straight lines becomes a compelling image that invites the viewer to take a walk through the forest just as I did when I made the image.







ISO 200  
1/45 sec.  
f/8  
42mm lens

## CURVES

Curves create a gentle, meandering path that leads the viewer through your image to the subject (**Figure 4.1**). Curves are lines but with a softer feel to them. With an S-curve, the path to your subject is not as direct as a line, so it gives a sense of peace and calm. S-curves are great leading lines to a subject (**Figure 4.2**), and they are such strong elements that they can stand alone as the subject itself (**Figure 4.3**). Whenever I see an S-curve, my eye follows it to see where it leads and to see whether it will make a good photograph.

**FIGURE 4.1**

Centering myself in the middle of the path and using a fairly small aperture (Chapter 2) for increased depth of field creates a composition that invites the viewer to step into the frame and wander down the path and through the forest. I find S-curves to be friendly lead-in lines in composition.





ISO 200  
1/350 sec.  
f/11  
550mm lens

**FIGURE 4.2**  
The curve of a great blue heron's neck leads from the left side of the frame to the fish he has clamped in his beak, creating a very natural pose.



ISO 800  
1/7 sec.  
f/8  
16mm  
Fisheye lens

**FIGURE 4.3**  
An S-curve is such a strong element in composition that the curve itself can be the subject, as in this image of a curved staircase at Fort Point in San Francisco. Using a Fisheye lens emphasized the curvature of the staircase. Hand-holding the camera at 1/7 sec. required a faster ISO to gain enough depth and sharpness.

## LINES

All images are made up of a series of lines, shapes, and forms (**Figure 4.4**). Lines are what lead viewers into the frame and to the subject (also known as leading lines). When artfully composed, an image will have leading lines that direct the viewer's eye where you want it to go. They may be bold and noticeable, creating a direct path to the subject, or they can be subtle and less obvious. Straight lines convey a sense of strength and power and often have a static feel to them. Diagonal lines also signify power, but rather than being static, they convey a sense of motion within a still photograph.

**FIGURE 4.4**

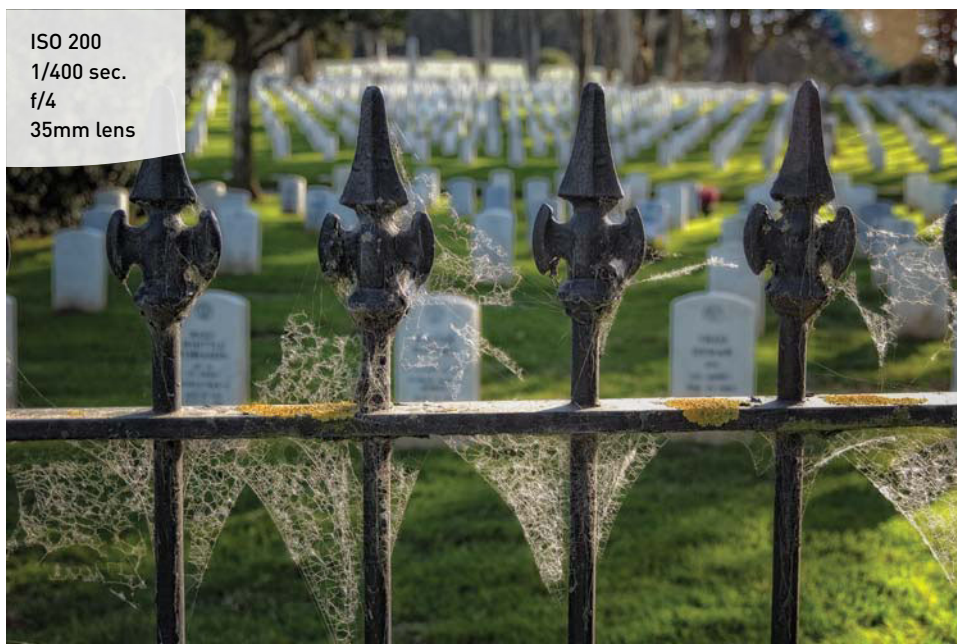
Lines, circles, and shapes make up this graphic image of an old church. Black and white emphasizes the graphic quality.





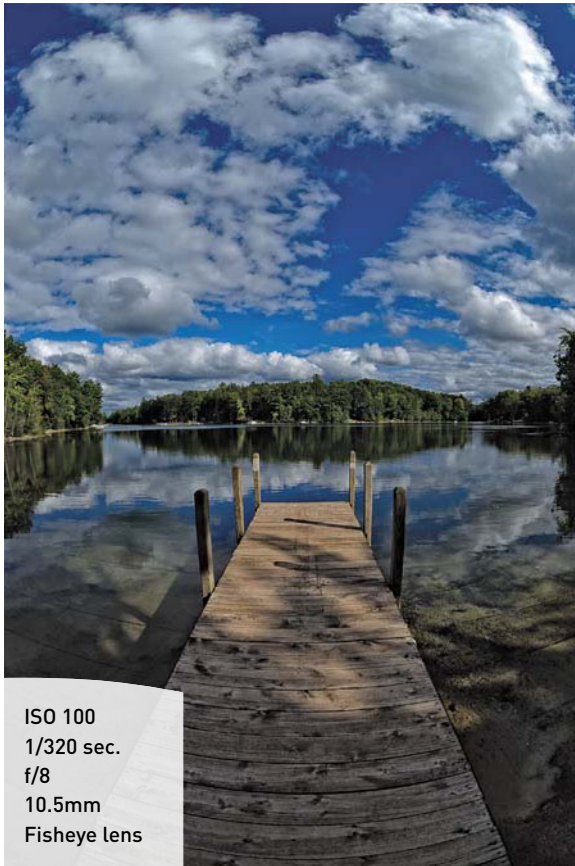
## STRAIGHT LINES

Straight lines can pass through an image horizontally or vertically. A horizontal line going through a photograph can create a sense of calm, giving a static feel to an image (Figure 4.5). I find straight, horizontal lines in a photograph to be dividing lines or barricades, keeping the viewer on the outside looking in. Depending on what you are trying to accomplish, a horizontal line can either make or break an image. On the other hand, a vertical line can give a sense of strength and height, leading me directly into the frame with no question as to where I am trying to direct the viewer's eye (Figure 4.6). When making a bold composition with a straight line leading towards the subject, I like to center myself on the leading line to give the image symmetry and power. Vertical lines can be leading lines, or they can be the subject itself, as in the case of the tree trunks covered in snow, in Figure 4.7.



**FIGURE 4.5**

The spider-web-covered fence blocks me from entering the cemetery, which creates a strong message. Using a wider aperture to blur the background further emphasizes the fence, with just a hint of the cemetery beyond.



**FIGURE 4.6**

The dock leading to the beautiful lake scene beyond is as much a part of the picture as the subject it leads your eye towards. I used a 180-degree Fisheye lens to include as much in the frame as possible.



**FIGURE 4.7**

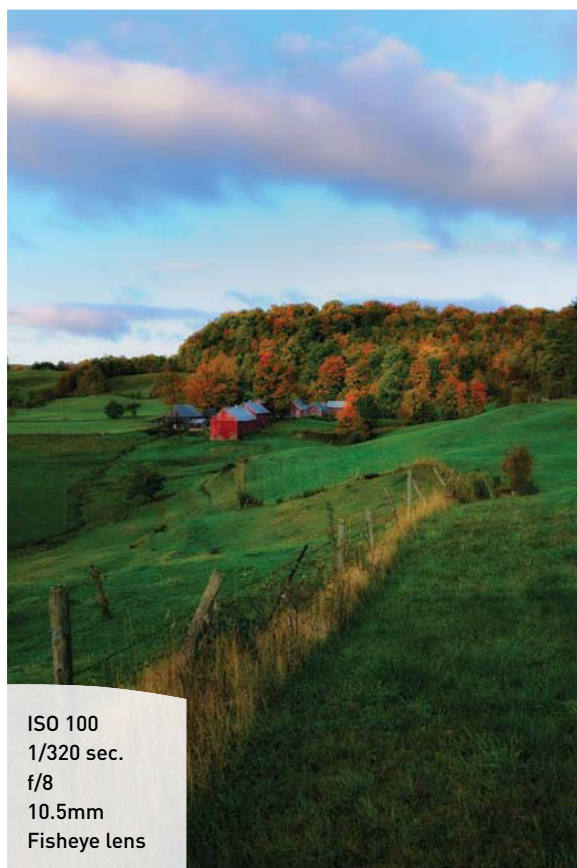
Rather than being leading lines, the tall, straight tree trunks with their branches covered in snow are the subject in this image. The contrast of white against the reddish trunks makes this a very simple yet strong composition.



## DIAGONAL LINES

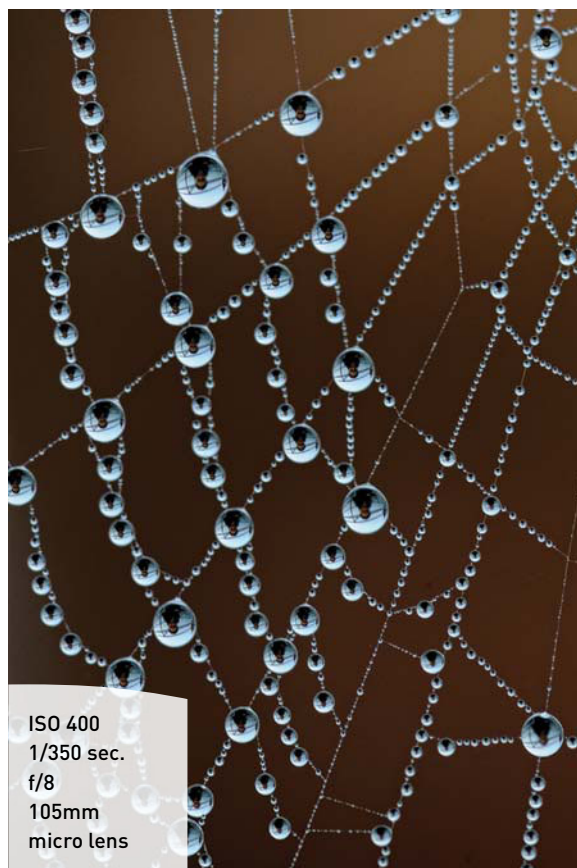
I like to use diagonal lines moving through the frame to convey a sense of motion that is hard to capture in a still photograph. I often use diagonal lines to lead the viewer's eye to the subject, as in **Figure 4.8**. The fence leads through the fields to Jenne Farm in the distance.

Diagonal lines can create a graphic element when they converge, as in the close-up of a dew-covered spiderweb in **Figure 4.9**. The nature of a spiderweb creates a sense of vanishing point as the drops start big and become smaller as they move towards the center of the web.



**FIGURE 4.8**

Diagonal lines have a feel of movement that is hard to convey with straight lines. This image of Jenne Farm, with the fence line leading to the buildings, incorporates a diagonal line that becomes curved with the rolling hills.



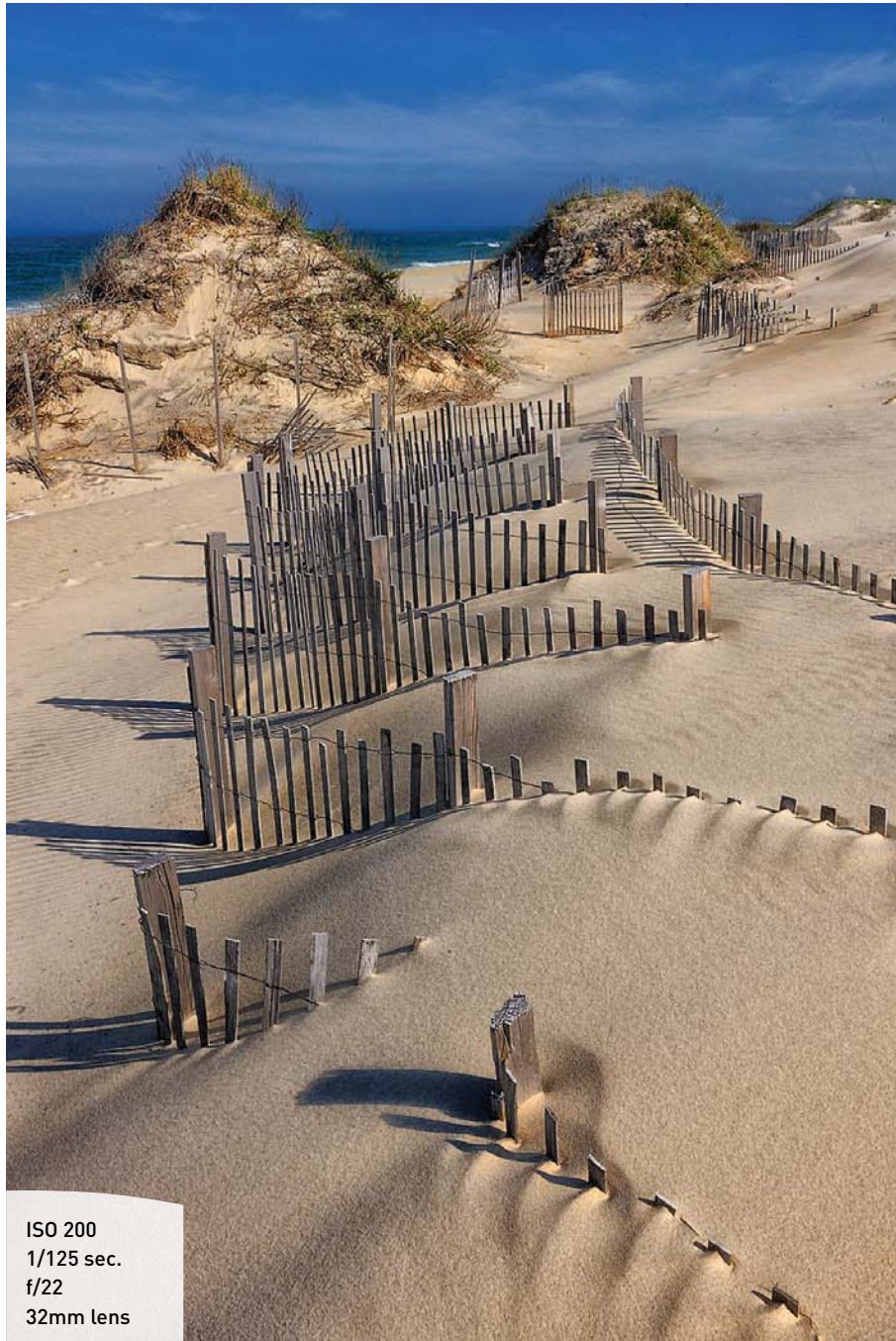
**FIGURE 4.9**

Shooting on a parallel plane with the spider web allowed me to use a mid-range aperture of f/8 and still have depth of field throughout. The slight breeze forced me to increase my ISO to reach a faster shutter speed. Hand-holding the camera gave me more versatility in my composition.

Diagonal lines can also be the subject, as in the image of a sand fence as it zigzags along the beach towards the ocean (Figure 4.10).

#### FIGURE 4.10

Moving in close with a wide-angle lens emphasizes the entry point into the frame, with the diagonal lines moving back and forth and leading the viewer to the beach beyond. The ocean and sky in the background are supporting elements in the image, to give it a sense of place (Chapter 6).



ISO 200  
1/125 sec.  
f/22  
32mm lens

## PATTERNS

Patterns are graphic images that have the same subject duplicated over and over within the frame. Repeating lines and shapes make up these patterns. Nature, in all her beauty, provides us with endless patterns to photograph.

The intricate design of a dahlia provides great patterns as petal after petal unfolds to reveal the flower's beauty (**Figure 4.11**).



**FIGURE 4.11**  
Using a telephoto zoom, I focused at minimum-focus distance to fill the frame with the flower.

The wake from a boat created a pattern of waves that caught the light and my attention (**Figure 4.12**). I used a telephoto to fill the frame with the repeating pattern, excluding everything else.

Sometimes even the simplest subjects become compelling when another element is added, such as the icicles hanging from the rock wall in **Figure 4.13**. The vertical lines of the icicles contrast with the round rocks.



**FIGURE 4.12**

I increased my ISO to 400mm to be able to achieve a fast shutter speed because I was photographing the wake from a moving boat.



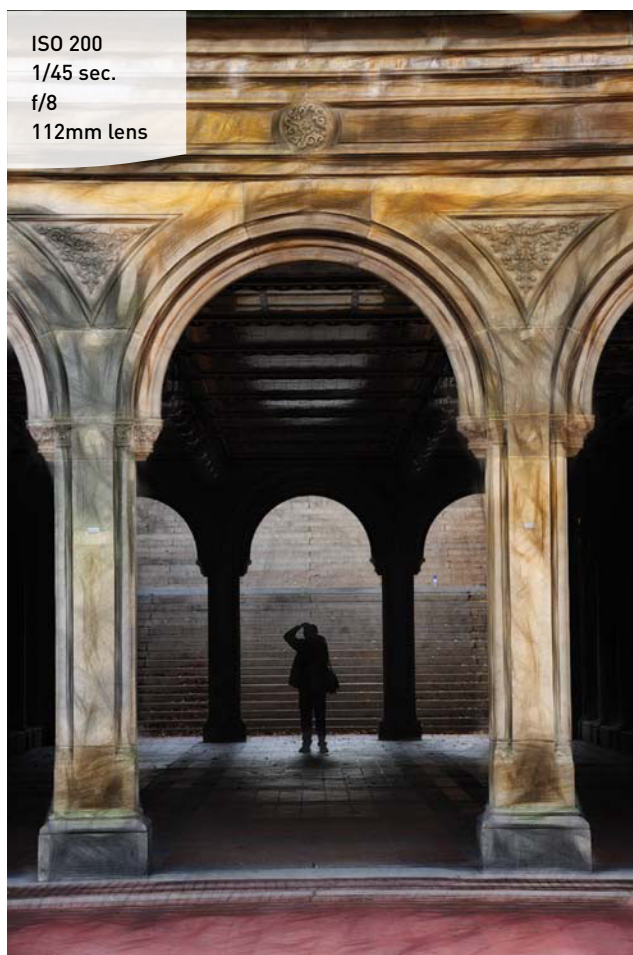
**FIGURE 4.13**

Icicles on a rock wall created a pattern of vertical lines. I like the warmth of the rocks and the way they contrast with the cooler, blue colors of the icicles. Blue conveys coldness in an image (more on color in Chapter 5).



## FRAMING

When I think of framing, I think of my image hanging on the wall with a nice mat and frame to show it off. However, there are other methods of framing an image: in the viewfinder, using foreground elements to “frame” the subject. While photographing in Central Park in New York, my attention was drawn to two arches. I liked the way they repeated each other, giving vanishing-point feel with the foreground arch being much larger than the background arch. I patiently waited for the people to move through, when another photographer with a similar idea stepped into the frame (**Figure 4.14**). Liking the sense of scale (Chapter 6) that the photographer added to the image, I quickly clicked off a few shots. Framing can be a very effective use of elements to highlight the subject. Be careful not to use it too heavily, or it becomes the focus of the photograph.



**FIGURE 4.14**

The photographer changed the effect of the image I was composing from a simple graphic to a framed composition. The giant arches framed the smaller photographer and added a sense of scale to the image that would not have happened without him in the frame.

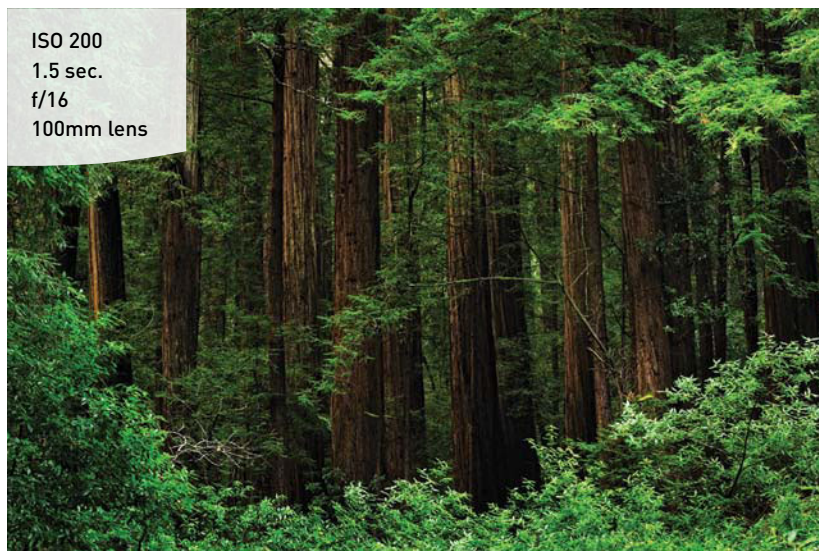


Using the foliage to frame the trees in Muir Woods in California creates a sense of looking through a peephole (**Figure 4.15**).

Teardrop Arch is an iconic subject that has been photographed over and over (**Figure 4.16**). Many people use a vertical composition to fill the frame with the rock wall, using the arch to reveal Monument Valley in the distance through the arch. Looking for a slightly different composition, I turned my camera to a horizontal composition and zoomed back to include the edge of the arch. I like the effect of part of the image framed and part of it wide open. I think it adds to the sense of place.

#### FIGURE 4.15

I mounted my camera on a tripod to enable me to shoot at a smaller aperture to render sharp focus on both the foliage and the trees beyond and still keep my ISO low, which resulted in a slow shutter speed.



#### FIGURE 4.16

With no place to set up a tripod and needing a fairly small aperture for increased depth of field, I braced myself using proper hand-holding techniques to shoot at a slow shutter speed.

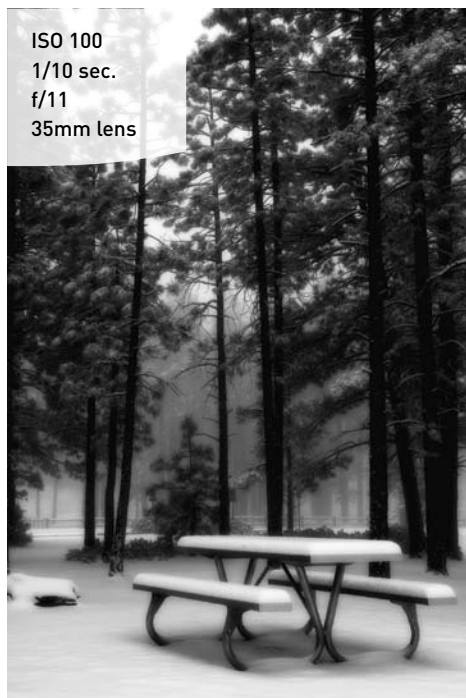




## VERTICAL OR HORIZONTAL SHOTS?

Vertically or horizontally—which way do you turn the camera? Most cameras are set up with grips that lend themselves to being held comfortably in a horizontal, or landscape, orientation. The higher-end cameras and mid-range cameras with external grips allow the use of vertical, or portrait, composition with the same comfortable grip and shutter release. Which direction do you turn when you're composing an image? It depends on what you want to include and what you want to exclude. There is no right or wrong. Many times, it's simply a matter of preference and what you are trying to communicate in your images.

On a snowy winter morning at Bryce Canyon National Park, I was heading for my car when a lone picnic table covered in snow caught my attention (**Figure 4.17**). My first reaction was to photograph the scene in a vertical format to lend height to the tall trees. On a whim, I turned the camera back to a horizontal position and clicked a few frames. Upon reviewing the images, I decided I liked the spacious feel that I was able to capture in the horizontal orientation (**Figure 4.18**). Both images work; I simply like



**FIGURE 4.17**

My first reaction to the snowy scene was to turn the camera to a vertical composition to emphasize the tall trees.



**FIGURE 4.18**

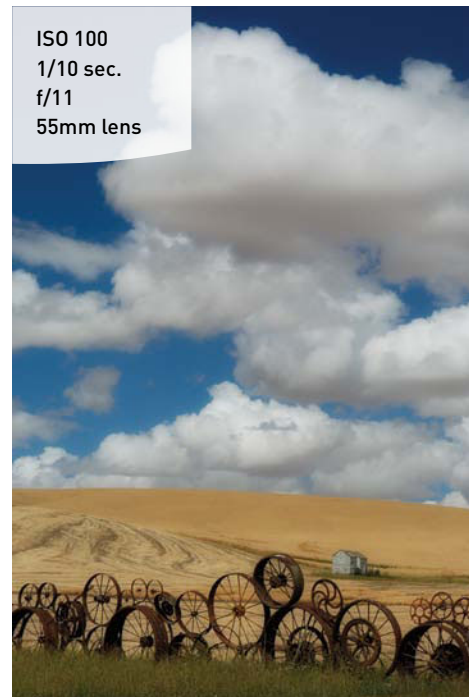
Here I turned the camera to a horizontal composition, zoomed out a bit more, and found I liked the more spacious feel that I was able to achieve.

the horizontal image better. Had I not turned the camera, I would have been perfectly happy with the vertical image. It was an overcast morning, and I knew when I clicked the shutter that the images would be flat, but I had black and white in mind when I was making these images. Using NIK B&W Infrared software added drama and impact to these otherwise flat-light images.

While photographing the wheat fields in the Palouse region in eastern Washington, I stopped by a historic farm that is noted for its fence made of thousands of wheels and gears soldered together. It was a beautiful, blue-sky day, with big puffy clouds floating in the sky. The question came to mind, which way should I turn my camera? Did I want to convey the vast wheat fields with the fence as a strong foreground element (**Figure 4.19**)? Or, would turning the camera in a vertical format emphasizing the blue sky and puffy clouds better tell the story? Once again, either image works, but what was I trying to communicate in my image? My goal was to capture the wheel fence, which both images do quite well. So, it boils down to either more sky or more wheat fields. I felt that the wheat fields gave the image a greater sense of place, and I was still able to include some sky and clouds. In this case I prefer the horizontal composition (**Figure 4.20**).



**FIGURE 4.19**  
A horizontal composition gives the image a feeling of width and expanse.

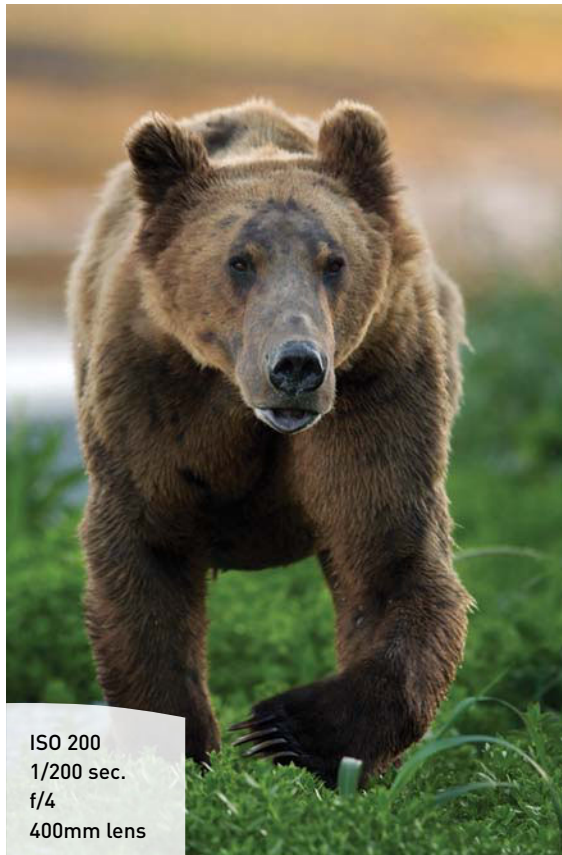


**FIGURE 4.20**  
A vertical composition emphasizes the vastness of the sky rather than the fence and fields.

## VERTICAL VS. HORIZONTAL

Next time, study both sets of images and decide what you like about each image. Do you connect with the vertical or horizontal images in the two examples? There is usually no right or wrong answer, it simply depends on the subject and the feeling you choose to convey. Lines, shape, and form all change their appearance when the camera is turned from a horizontal to vertical format.

However, most times it's pretty obvious which way to turn your camera. When a grizzly bear is walking straight at the lens, I turn the camera to a vertical composition to fill the frame with the bear, centering it in the frame for increased impact (**Figure 4.21**). And when a sandhill crane with its wings fully extended flies by, I instinctively turn the camera to a horizontal composition to include it all, from wing tip to wing tip (**Figure 4.22**).



**FIGURE 4.21**

A vertical composition was the obvious choice with this grizzly bear.

### FIGURE 4.22

The position of the wings and the body posture of the sandhill crane make a nice horizontal composition.



## LAYERS

Another effective use of lines and shapes is to compose an image using layering of the landscape to create visual depth. Aerial perspective lends itself to this technique (Figure 4.23). When the sun is dropping lower in the sky, partially backlighting the scene, the distant mountains take on an ethereal look as they seem to fade away into the distance. Layering is also achieved when there are repeating patterns, like the rolling wheat fields photographed from a relatively high perspective. The undulating hills with the shadow and light playing across them produce a unique layering effect (Figure 4.24).

### LAYERING

I normally select a telephoto lens when capturing an image with the layered look. I feel that the tighter composition lends itself nicely to an intimate landscape.

ISO 100  
1/50 sec.  
f/22  
200mm lens



**FIGURE 4.23**  
Using a long lens to compress the scene and dialing in minus exposure compensation to add drama to the layers create a very interesting effect called aerial perspective.

ISO 200  
1/800 sec.  
f/6.7  
190mm lens



**FIGURE 4.24**  
Shadow and light (Chapter 3) as well as color contrast (Chapter 5) all play important roles in creating the layered look in a composition.

# Chapter 4 Assignments

Before moving on to Chapter 5, take some time to complete the following assignments to gain a better grasp of lines, shape, and form and the role they play in composition.

## Lines

Using lines to lead to your subject, work a scene by shooting straight on with the lines moving horizontally through the image to see how a horizontal line can divide the frame and create a barrier between the viewer and the subject. Using the same subject, change position so that the line is moving in a diagonal direction towards the subject. For the final shot, shoot straight down a line towards your subject to see the dramatic impact that shooting directly towards the subject has on your images. Notice how changing your camera angle dramatically alters the effect of lines and their effect on the final composition.

## Curves

Go out and look for curves that lead your eye to your subject. Find a classic S-curve and use it to lead the viewer's eye to your subject. Note the softer approach of using curves as leading lines as opposed to the preceding assignment using straight lines.

## Vertical or Horizontal

The next time you are composing a scene, stop and ask yourself why you are composing it the way you are. Once you have captured the image in the orientation you first decided on, turn the camera to the opposite orientation (if you began with a horizontal position, turn the camera to a vertical position) and shoot the same scene. Compare the two images to see what qualities you like about each composition. You may be surprised that many scenes look as good or better when you turn the camera from one orientation to the other.

*Share your results with the book's Flickr group!*

*Join the group here: [flickr.com/groups/composition\\_fromsnapshottogreatshots](https://www.flickr.com/groups/composition_fromsnapshottogreatshots)*



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ISO 200  
1/125 sec.  
f/8  
24mm lens



# Color

## **UNDERSTANDING COLOR AND ITS ROLE IN MAKING DYNAMIC IMAGES**

Color plays a vital role in your photography. It can evoke reactions such as peace, fear, joy, anger, sadness, and so on. Understanding color and the message it sends can help you to achieve a better grasp of the images you make and their emotional impact on your viewers. How these colors are represented within a photograph evokes feelings in your viewers. The natural world is a cacophony of colors. It's these colors that first capture your viewer's attention as they blend together to make up the elements of an image.

## PORING OVER THE PICTURE

Secondary colors are made up of a mixture between two primary colors. Orange is a mix of red and yellow; green is a mix of blue and yellow; purple is a mix of red and blue. The combination of secondary colors in this photograph of a red-eyed tree frog blend together to create an image that portrays some of the vivid colors of nature.

ISO 200  
1/50 sec.  
f/5.6  
180mm lens

## PORING OVER THE PICTURE

ISO 200  
1/500 sec.  
f/8  
20mm lens

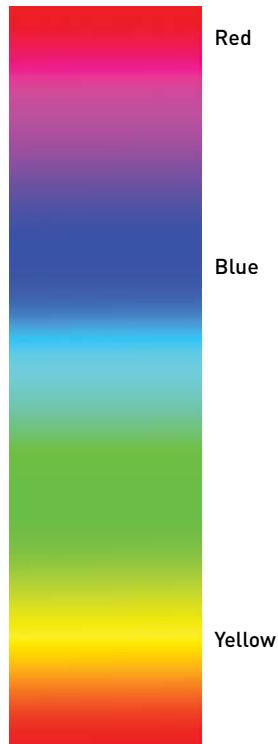




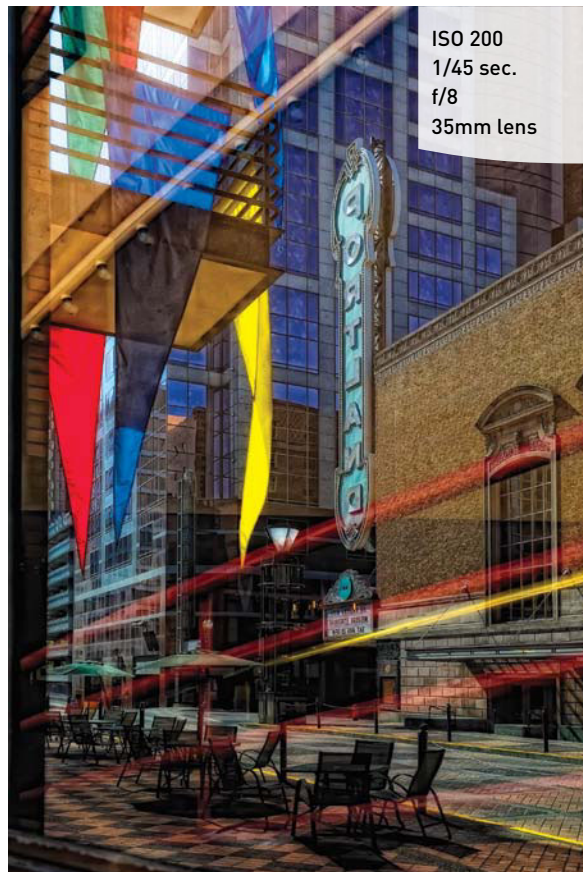


## COLOR WHEEL

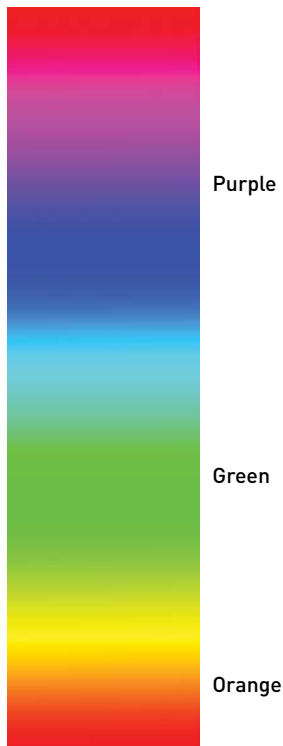
All colors are made from a mixture of two or more of the three primary colors: red, yellow, and blue (**Figure 5.1**). (Remember the nursery school rhyme about primary colors?) Primary colors are the boldest of all colors and have the greatest impact on a photograph. The reflection of Portland illustrates this, as the flags stand boldly apart from the rest of the colors in the scene (**Figure 5.2**). Mixing two primary colors together produces secondary colors, such as red and yellow mixing to create orange, blue and red mixing to make purple, and blue and yellow mixing to make green (**Figure 5.3**). The secondary colors of green leaves and a purple dahlia bud complement each other (**Figure 5.4**). Taking it even further by mixing primary with secondary colors reveals tertiary colors, which provide an unlimited color palette to work with. The relationship of these colors affects the mood of your images.



**FIGURE 5.1**  
Primary colors consist of red, yellow, and blue.



**FIGURE 5.2**  
Your eye goes to the primary colors in this image first.



**FIGURE 5.3**

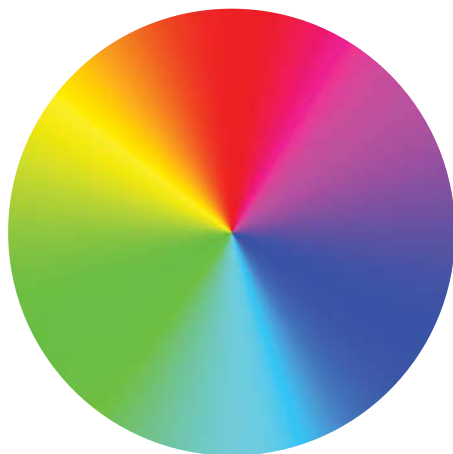
Secondary colors consist of orange, green, and purple.



**FIGURE 5.4**

Secondary colors go together nicely in this image of a dahlia bud among the green foliage.

A color wheel (**Figure 5.5**) is a good place to start to better understand colors, their meaning, their relationship to each other, and their impact on your images.



**FIGURE 5.5**

The color wheel illustrates the relationship of colors to each other.

## COMPLEMENTARY COLORS

Colors that are opposite each other on the color wheel are said to be complementary colors; their contrasting colors complement each other. The complementary color for red is green, for blue is orange, and for yellow is purple. Some common complementary colors in nature include the red of a ladybug in a complementary sea of green (Figure 5.6), and the cool blue tones of a late afternoon in winter reflected from the sky to the mountains to the snow-covered ground, emphasizing the feeling of coldness and offering a nice contrast to the warm colors of the orange snowplow in the foreground (Figure 5.7).

**FIGURE 5.6**

Red and green sit across the color scale from each other, making them complementary colors.



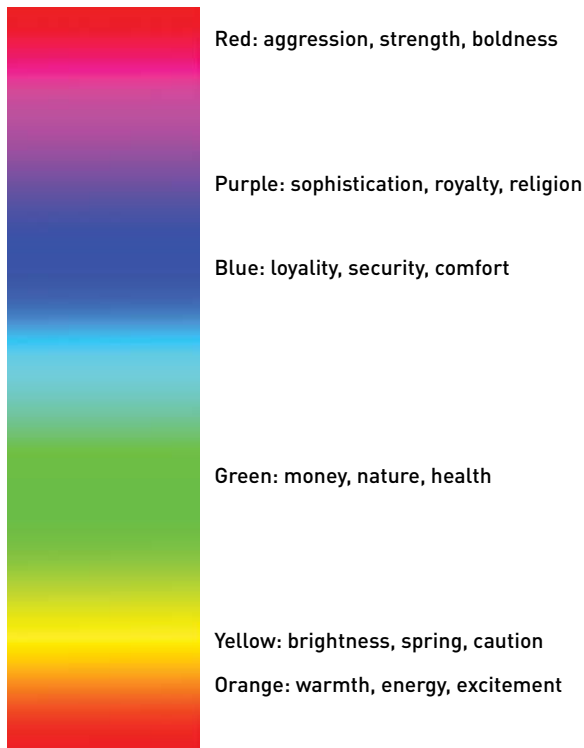
**FIGURE 5.7**

Blue and orange are complementary colors.



## EMOTION OF COLOR

Color is said to stir emotion. When you look at a photograph, do you feel anger, joy, peace, tension, or some other emotion? It is likely that if you look closely at the photograph and understand the emotion of color, you will find a link to the image and your feelings based on the colors that are represented within the image (**Figure 5.8**). What emotion do you feel when you look at the following photographs? Does your emotional response have to do with the colors of the image? Compare your emotional response to the description of the colors. Do they match? When you look at a beautiful green butterfly against the soft greens of foliage (**Figure 5.9**), do you feel the serenity and calm that green represents? Flowers are supposed to instill the feeling of youth and innocence; is that what you feel when you look at this dahlia (**Figure 5.10**)? Do you feel a slight chill when your eye lands on the image of the Arctic fox in winter (**Figure 5.11**)? If you do, I have been successful in my rendition of the scene. The yellow and orange buoys (**Figure 5.12**) work together because yellow is a primary color, and orange comes from mixing red with yellow. The splash of blue scattered throughout the image adds the contrast of a cool-toned color.



**FIGURE 5.8**  
Emotional correlation  
to colors.

### FIGURE 5.9

Green: nature,  
peace, calmness.



### FIGURE 5.10

Green: nature,  
peace, calmness.  
Pink: femininity,  
childlikeness,  
health. White:  
innocence, purity,  
cleanliness.



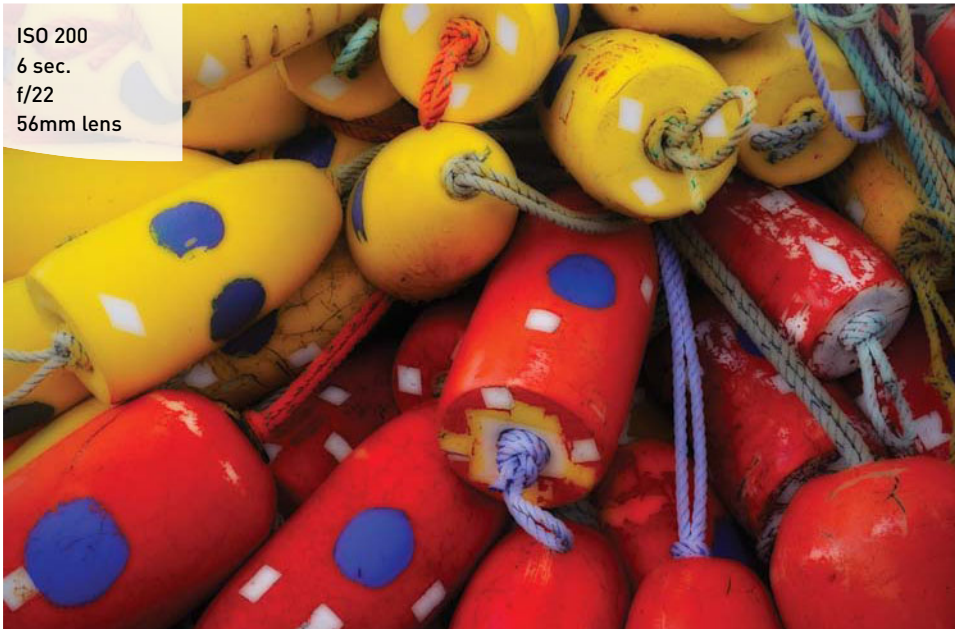


ISO 200  
1/320 sec.  
f/8  
550mm lens



**FIGURE 5.11**  
White: innocence,  
purity, cleanliness.  
Blue: cold.

ISO 200  
6 sec.  
f/22  
56mm lens



**FIGURE 5.12**  
Red and yellow:  
boldness, high  
energy, passion.  
Blue: cold.

## BLACK AND WHITE COLORS

As mentioned earlier, although they are not often considered colors, black, white, and all the shades of gray are indeed colors. And, like the vivid colors of a color wheel, black and white represent their own set of emotions (**Figure 5.13**). A dark and stormy afternoon at the coast rendered a flat, monochromatic image of the pounding waves. By converting the image to black-and-white infrared, I was able to convey the drama and power of the storm as the white waves crashed against the dark rocks (**Figure 5.14**).

Whenever I want to create a sense of age or history, I think black and white (**Figure 5.15**). In the not-so-distant past, our forebears had to render the world in black and white. It was through exposure (Chapter 3) and the enhancing of the tonal properties of a scene that they were able to bring life and emotion to their images.

White: purity,  
simplicity,  
cleanliness

Gray: cold,  
distinctiveness,  
businesslike  
quality

Black:  
class, drama,  
seriousness

ISO 100  
1/60 sec.  
f/8  
200mm lens



**FIGURE 5.13**

Emotional correlation  
to black and white.

**FIGURE 5.14**

Black and white infrared brings the drama of a winter storm on the Oregon coast  
to life.

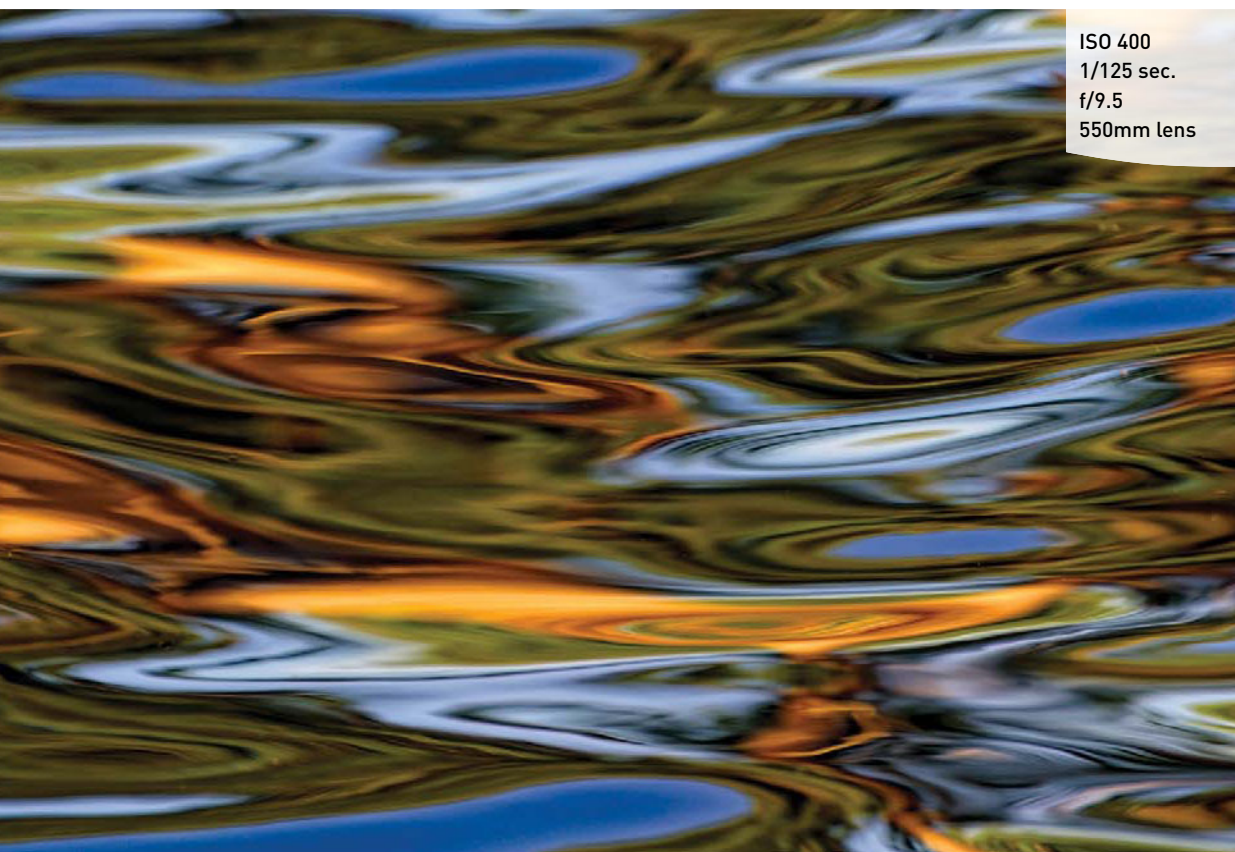
ISO 200  
1/125 sec.  
f/8  
18mm lens



**FIGURE 5.15**  
Black and white  
evoke age and  
history.

## COLORS AS PATTERNS

Color can be the subject, as in the reflection photograph in **Figure 5.16**, where the undulating colors blend, contrast, and complement each other in repeating patterns. Flowers are excellent examples of color patterns as petal upon petal repeats a color scheme unique to each and every flower. The colors can be bold, powerful, and passionate (**Figure 5.17**). Or, you can strip away the bold, warm colors and replace them with black and white and shades of gray to create an image of the same subject that imparts a totally different emotion. With no vivid colors to influence your feelings, it's the graphic nature of black and white that captures your attention in **Figure 5.18**.



ISO 400  
1/125 sec.  
f/9.5  
550mm lens

**FIGURE 5.16**

Warm and cool colors complement each other in this reflection.





**FIGURE 5.17**

Bold reds and yellows capture your attention immediately.



**FIGURE 5.18**

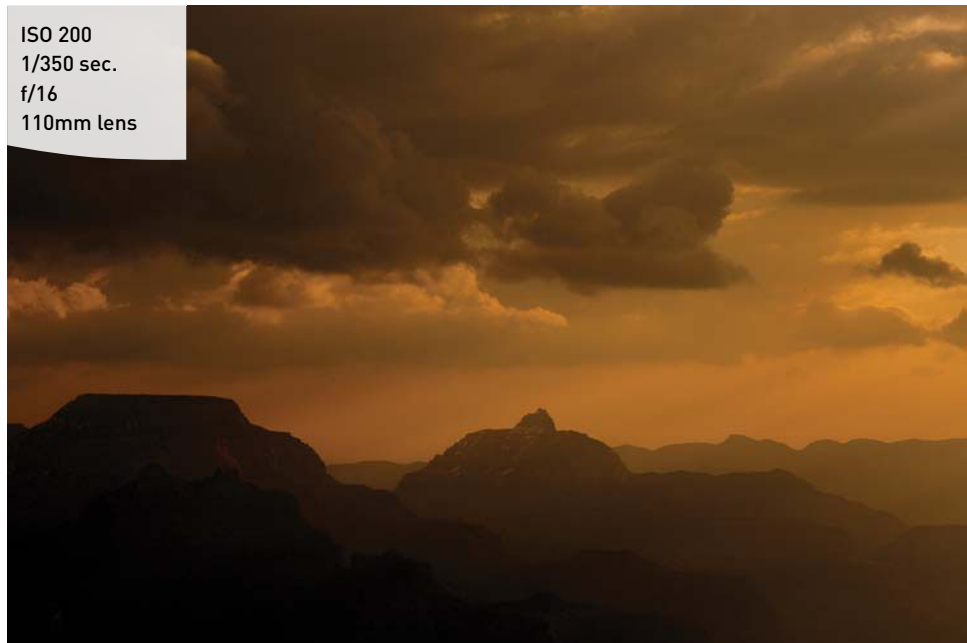
Stripped of bold colors, the pattern becomes even more graphic in black and white.

## COLORS AND WHITE BALANCE

Light has color, and as such influences the way your images look at any given time of the day or night. The warm colors of first light or at sunset give a feeling of warmth, as the sun baths the world in its golden glow (**Figure 5.19**). Twilight evokes a completely different emotion with its cool tones. I have a feeling of peace and contentment at the close of the day when the sun has dropped beneath the horizon, taking with it the warm tones and leaving in their wake the cool blue of evening (**Figure 5.20**).

### FIGURE 5.19

Sunrise and sunset, with the sun low on the horizon, produce warm colors.



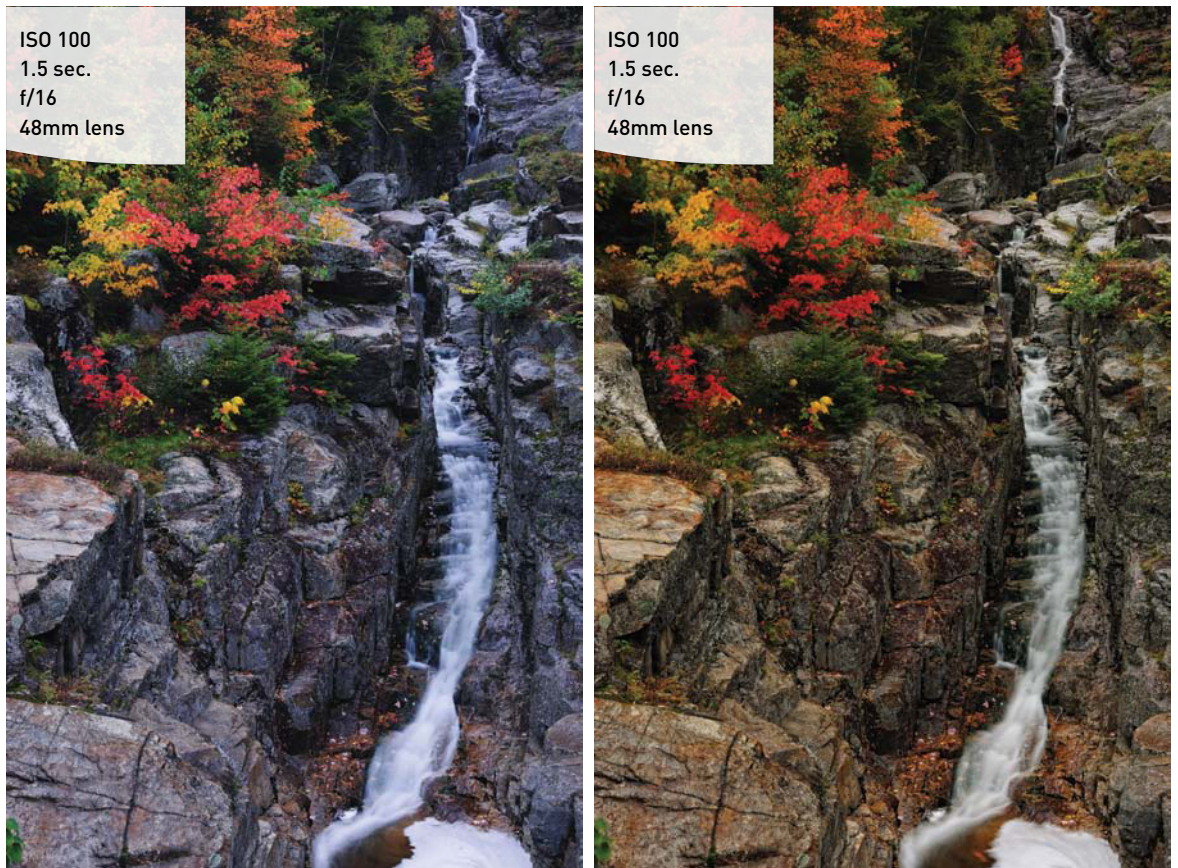
### FIGURE 5.20

Twilight blue comes after the sun has set, taking the warm colors with it.





With the ability to control white balance in-camera I have even greater control over the emotional outcome of my images. I can warm up the cool tones of an overcast day by simply switching from the Auto white balance to Cloudy and bringing forth the warm colors (Figure 5.21).



**FIGURE 5.21**

Auto white balance captures the cool tones of an overcast day (left). Cloudy white balance brings forth the warm colors that are subdued by an overcast sky (right).

## SIGNIFICANCE OF COLOR

Certain colors, when combined, trigger specific emotions in our hearts. What do you think of when you see the colors red, white, and blue together? I have a sense of patriotism when I see our flag (**Figure 5.22**). The changing colors of leaves as they transition from summer greens to the reds and yellows of fall give a sense of closure as one season comes to an end (**Figure 5.23**). For me, a rainbow signifies the end of a storm and a world freshly scrubbed and clean (**Figure 5.24**).

**FIGURE 5.22**

Red, white, and blue convey a sense of patriotism.

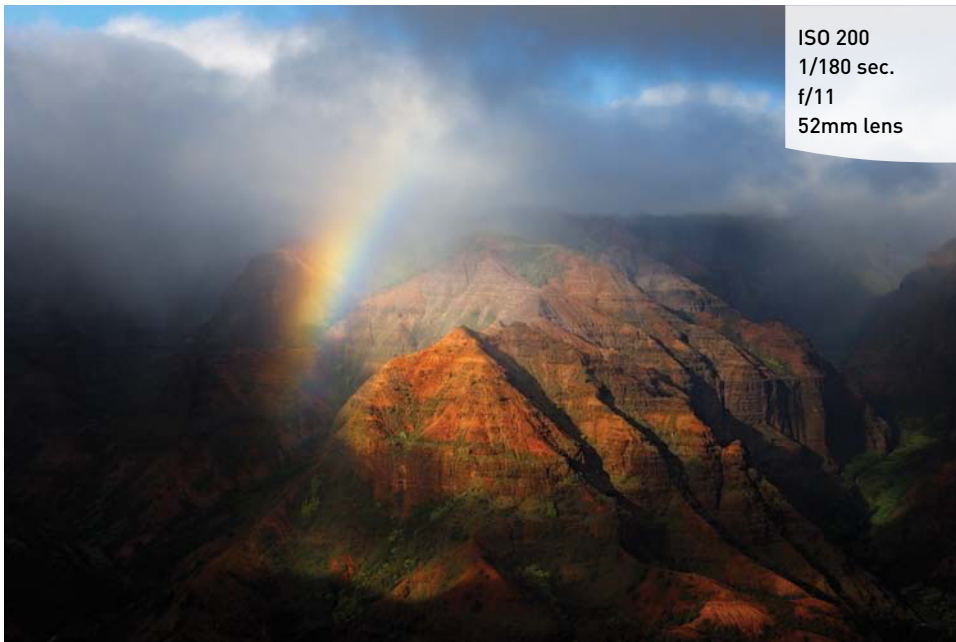






ISO 100  
1/30 sec.  
f/8  
26mm lens

**FIGURE 5.23**  
The reds and yellows as the foliage turns signal the end of summer and the beginning of fall.



ISO 200  
1/180 sec.  
f/11  
52mm lens

**FIGURE 5.24**  
Rainbows signify the end of a storm and a fresh new beginning.

# Chapter 5 Assignments

You should now have a much better understanding of color and how you can use it to convey emotion in your images. Take time to do the assignments before moving on to Chapter 6.

To get a better understanding of color and the role it plays in composition, complete the following assignments.

## Understanding the Emotion of Color

Review your top 20 favorite images with the color wheel in mind. Do most of your images contain the bold primary colors of the first order, or are you drawn to more moderate secondary colors? Do you feel the emotional impact that the dominant color within your image normally conveys? Based on your evaluation, what colors are you drawn to more often, and why? Are you drawn to the warmer end of the spectrum, where colors are bold and full of power and impact, or are you drawn to the cooler end of the spectrum, where there is a feeling of calm and peace?

## Black and White as Colors

Go in search of images that you feel will make good black-and-white photographs. Shoot in color and convert your images to black and white in the digital darkroom. Do they have the tonal range to make good black-and-white photographs? Study the images to see what works in black and white and what doesn't. Notice that increased contrast is necessary to capture the tonal ranges that make a good black-and-white image.

## White Balance and Its Influence on Color

The next time you are out photographing, dial in the different white balance settings so that you can compare the effect of the different settings on your image. Dialing in Cloudy on an overcast day adds warmth, whereas quite the opposite effect is achieved by dialing in Incandescent to cool down the scene. Try this in a variety of settings and light to get a good feel of how the white balance you select plays an important role in color.

*Share your results with the book's Flickr group!*

*Join the group here: [flickr.com/groups/composition\\_fromsnapshotstogreatshots](https://www.flickr.com/groups/composition_fromsnapshotstogreatshots)*

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ISO 400  
1/5 sec.  
f/4  
200mm lens





# Spatial Relationships

## **THE WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY, AND HOW THAT GO INTO THE MAKING OF A GOOD COMPOSITION**

You've made a substantial journey, from the moment you select a lens (Chapter 1) to best represent the view you have in your mind's eye to deciding what the best exposure combination (Chapter 2) suits the moment. You have evaluated the light (Chapter 3), studied the scene from a variety of perspectives using leading lines to draw your viewer into the scene (Chapter 4), and either enhanced the colors or converted the image to black and white (Chapter 5). This chapter ties it all together with a look at special relationships: what you choose to include as well as what you exclude in your photographs, where you position yourself in relation to your subject, when is the best time to click the shutter, why you are drawn to the subject in the first place, and how to make it all come together in a photograph that speaks to the viewers, sharing with them your emotional connection to a moment in time.


PORING OVER THE PICTURE

Background

Middle ground

ISO 100  
1/125 sec.  
f/16  
20mm lens

Foreground



The steam hides much of the background, keeping the viewer's eye from wandering beyond the frame.

The lifting fog swirls around the pools at West Thumb, in Yellowstone National Park. As the sun begins to burn away the fog, a beautiful blue pool becomes visible. A few moments later the fog lifts a bit more, revealing the snow-covered trees beyond the pool. Selecting an ultra-wide-angle lens to capture the entire scene before me, I moved in close to the snowy mounds in the foreground, giving the image a strong foundation that leads the viewer's eye to the pool in the middle ground and beyond to the trees in the background. The lifting fog continued to conceal the distant mountains in the far background, giving the image a more intimate feel.

## PORING OVER THE PICTURE

ISO 200  
1/15 sec.  
f/8  
38mm lens

● The slight color on the horizon conveys a sense of anticipation of the approaching dawn.

On a trip to Arches National  
Park, I selected a wide-angle lens  
and moved in tight on North Window so  
I could use it to frame South Window beyond.  
I had to choose an aperture that would give me  
enough depth of field to render both foreground and  
background in sharp focus while keeping the shutter speed to  
a manageable setting for hand-holding the camera. Hand-holding  
the camera gave me the flexibility to move around and carefully choose  
my composition.

## POINT OF VIEW

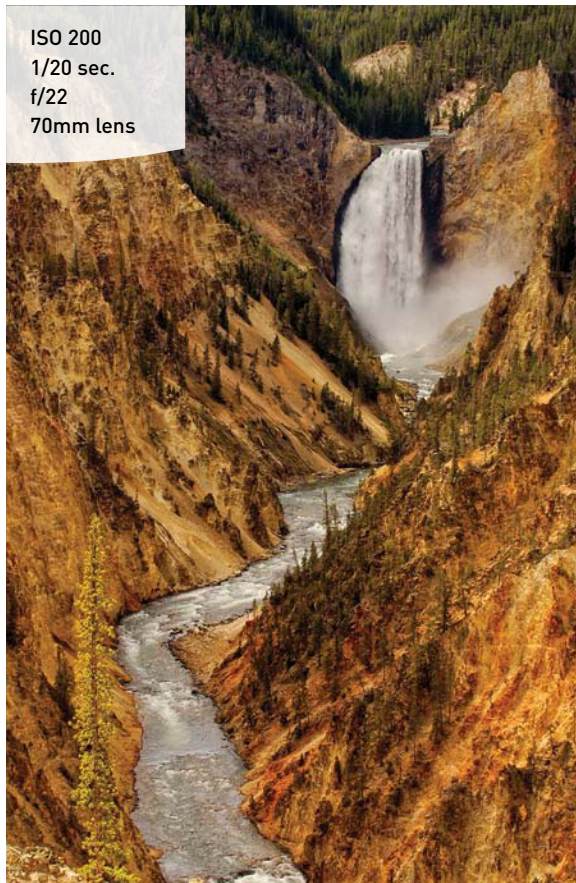
When I first saw the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, with its sweeping view upriver to Lower Yellowstone Falls, I was totally overwhelmed at the view. Standing on the edge of the canyon, my eyes took in the entire scene from left to right and all that was in between. How could I compose the scene to share my emotional reaction to the moment—the overpowering sense of being very, very small? I could attach my widest-angle lens and include the canyon walls, leading me to the falls beyond to convey this sense (**Figure 6.1**). Moving in tighter on the canyon, I turned the camera to a vertical format to match the leading lines of the winding river to the falls (**Figure 6.2**). Wanting an even tighter view of the falls to capture the sheer power of the rushing water, I reached into my bag and pulled out my telephoto zoom to fill the frame with the falls (**Figure 6.3**). Each image captures a unique perspective of the scene. It's up to you to decide which composition best portrays your vision.

**FIGURE 6.1**

Using a wide-angle lens captures the sweeping view of the canyon and the falls.

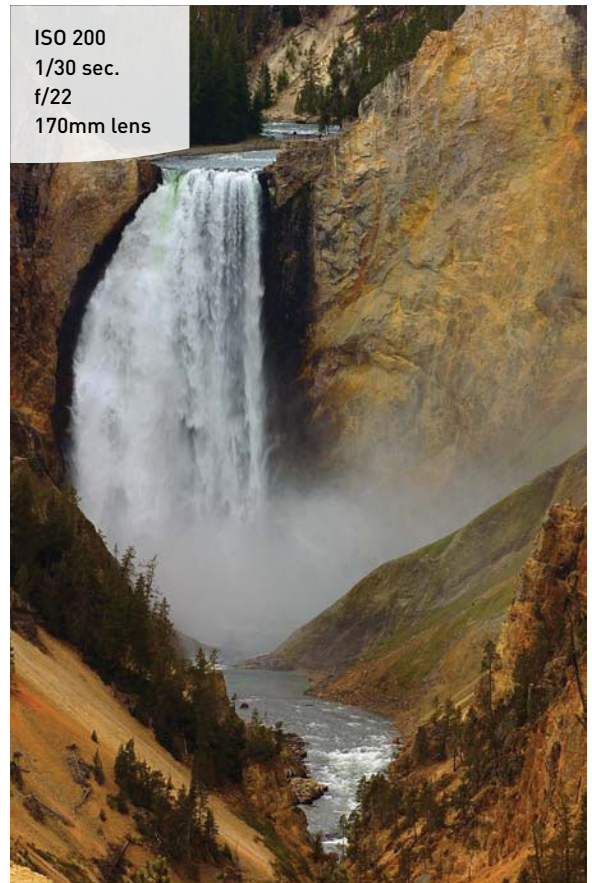






**FIGURE 6.2**

Using a wide aperture, especially with a longer lens, blurs distracting background details.



**FIGURE 6.3**

Using a telephoto lens eliminates the surrounding landscape, filling the frame with the falls.

## VISUAL DEPTH

Visual depth is communicated in a variety of ways. It's the aperture you select that controls depth of field. Another way to capture a scene that has great visual depth is to find a scene with a strong foreground, middle ground, and background to lead the viewer through your image, pausing now and then to take in the details before moving deeper into the image. How do you create that visual depth to engage your viewers to the point where they simply get lost in your images? I find that moving in tight on the foreground with a wide-angle lens and a small aperture heightens the sense of depth in my images (**Figure 6.4**).

### FIGURE 6.4

Fishing Cone in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, creates a strong foreground, with the vast, frozen expanse of Lake Yellowstone taking up the middle ground and the distant Absaroka Mountains in the background completing the composition.



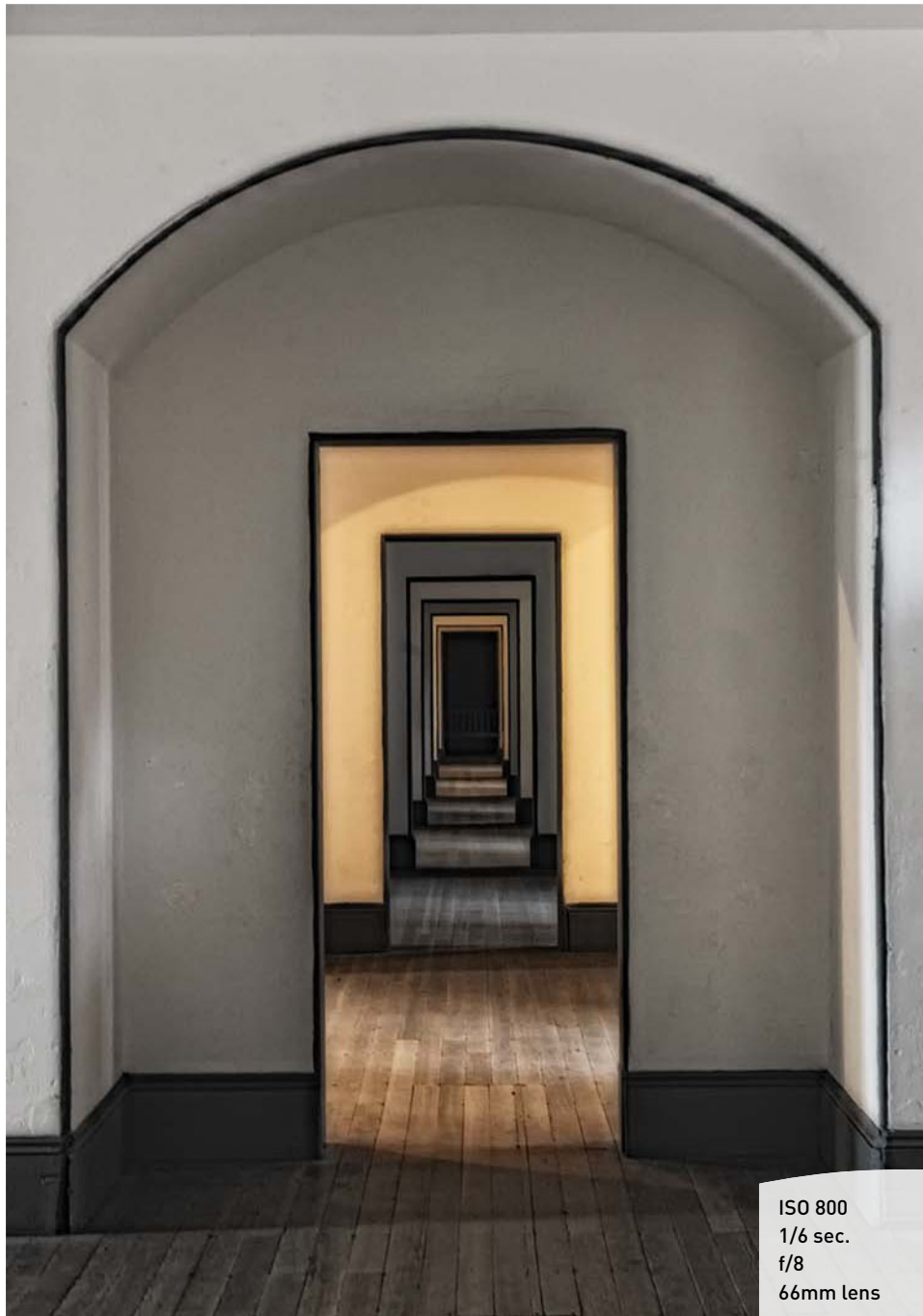
Visual depth can be achieved with a telephoto lens shooting into the afternoon light creating an aerial-perspective feel as each progressive layer of mountains gets fainter and fainter, disappearing into the distant haze (Figure 6.5).

### FIGURE 6.5

The Washer Woman in Canyonlands National Park, Utah, provides a strong graphic foreground element as the landscape recedes into the distance.



The effect of receding shapes, known as vanishing point, gives a sense of visual depth as each doorway becomes smaller the farther away it is from the camera (**Figure 6.6**).



**FIGURE 6.6**  
Shooting down the hallway through door after receding door creates a sense of visual depth. A high ISO was required to hand hold the camera in low light.

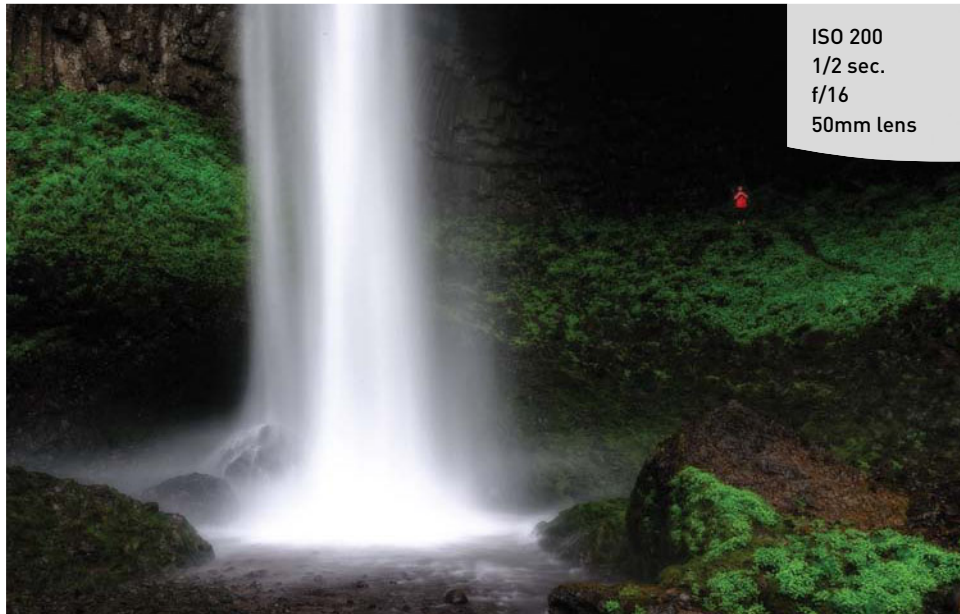
ISO 800  
1/6 sec.  
f/8  
66mm lens

## SCALE

I find that adding a person to a scene provides a sense of scale. Without the young man in red standing in the amphitheater at the base of Latourell Falls, you would have no idea of the size and power of the falls (**Figure 6.7**).

**FIGURE 6.7**

A person adds scale to the tight composition of this image of Latourell Falls in the Columbia Gorge, Oregon. His red T-shirt contrasts brightly with the green foliage.



## PERSPECTIVE

Many photographers have a tendency to shoot from eye level while in a standing position looking straight ahead. This works fine for many scenes, but it certainly restricts you from all the other points of view that are yours for the taking.

### LOOK UP, LOOK DOWN

Don't just look straight ahead; look up, look down. Don't stop there; get down or climb high if that's what it takes to get to eye level with your subject. When you wander through a forest, don't simply photograph the forest. Look up into the canopy of trees and capture the forest from a different perspective (**Figure 6.8**).

Raise your camera to the skies to capture birds in flight. Shooting up at a flying bird adds to the sense of place. It's a natural way to view birds and makes a good photograph (**Figure 6.9**).





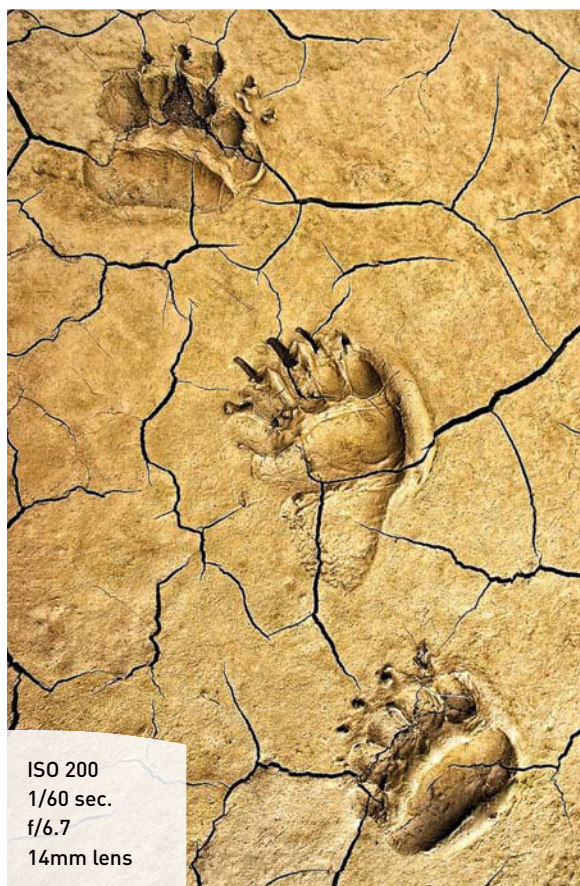
**FIGURE 6.8**  
Tilting back to look up into the forest canopy yielded a unique perspective.



**FIGURE 6.9**  
Photographing birds in flight as they pass overhead increases the sense of looking upward.

Don't stop now. You haven't looked down yet. The object you step on may well be a great photographic subject (**Figure 6.10**). I looked at several prints before deciding on this trio. Odd numbers have a sense of balance.

An approach from above afforded me a great view into an eagles nest. From the cover of the cliff, I was able to position myself to look over the edge towards the nest from a distance. An eagle chick with its crop full from a recent meal stared back at me (**Figure 6.11**). The higher perspective allowed me to look into the nest with an unobstructed view, which would not have been possible from another angle.



**FIGURE 6.10**

Tilting the camera at a slight angle created a diagonal path through the frame. A wide-angle lens allowed me to move in tight on the prints, capturing every detail in the cracked mud.



**FIGURE 6.11**

A downward camera angle provides a sense of perspective and scale to an eagle chick in its nest. Hand-holding the 200–400mm VR with a 1.4X teleconverter filled the frame as desired.



## GET UP, GET DOWN

At times, all it takes is to look up or down to find the composition you are searching for. Other times require you to become involved with your subject to the point where you get right down (or up) to its eye level for greater impact (**Figure 6.12**). When photographing shorebirds or other ground-dwelling birds, I often get down on my stomach to shoot at their eye level. A low perspective also renders the background a soft blur.

American skimmers nest in the sand. They sit on or near their eggs and chicks, providing the warmth they need as well as protecting them from the hot sun. By getting down at eye level with the parent and its chick, I was able to capture an intimate family portrait (**Figure 6.13**).



**FIGURE 6.12**

Shooting from a recessed blind put me right at ground level with this scaled quail. A wide aperture decreased the depth of field even further for a lovely soft blur in the background.



**FIGURE 6.13**

A ground pod allowed me to shoot right at eye level with the American skimmer and its chick.

Photographing birds in flight from a higher perspective completely changes the feel of an image. By shooting down or at eye level with a bird in flight, I am able to capture the top side of its wings, which is not an easy composition when shooting up at it. This angle adds to the sense of being at eye level with a bird in flight (**Figure 6.14**).

#### FIGURE 6.14

With my tripod raised to its full height, I was able to shoot at a downward angle at the great blue heron flying by.



## IN YOUR FACE, OR, ENVIRONMENTAL COMPOSITION

Filling the frame with your subject brings attention to each and every detail, giving the viewer a close-up glimpse of what you're shooting (**Figure 6.15**). A looser composition, on the other hand, one that includes the subject's environment, provides a greater sense of place. Close-ups provide great portraits, whereas environmental compositions provide information about where your subjects live and the conditions they must survive in. Wolves are typically shy creatures that try to avoid confrontations with humans, so it was a real treat to be able to focus my lens on this lone wolf emerging from the forest (**Figure 6.16**).

ISO 200  
1/320 sec.  
f/9  
310mm lens



**FIGURE 6.15**  
A close-up view of Denali enhances its majesty and power.

ISO 200  
1/2 sec.  
f/16  
50mm lens



**FIGURE 6.16**  
A lone wolf near a forest in Yellowstone communicates a solitary scene where the winters are harsh and survival can be a challenge.

While photographing the sunrise on a Hawaiian beach, I came across a monk seal taking a breather on the shore. I carefully approached, making sure not to scare it away or disturb it, and made the first composition with the seal, the beach, the ocean, and, oh yeah, a rainbow in the background (**Figure 6.17**). What a perfect setting for an environmental photograph. After capturing my fill of environmental compositions, I stealthily moved in closer, attaching my telephoto zoom to make a close-up portrait of the seal (**Figure 6.18**). It's important to capture tight compositions for detail as well as looser, more environmental poses to complete the story.



**FIGURE 6.17**

Including the environment in the scene adds a sense of place.



ISO 200  
1/250 sec.  
f/5.6  
116mm lens



**FIGURE 6.18**

Moving in closer with a telephoto lens gives me a close-up view of a monk seal, with the background diffused to a soft blur.

## HORIZON LINE

Where do you place your horizon? Do you place the horizon low in the frame to capture the beautiful clouds that fill the sky (**Figure 6.19**)? Or, does the reflection of the clouds in the wet sand draw your camera downward to place the horizon high in the frame (**Figure 6.20**)? There are times when the right composition is to place the horizon line in the middle of the frame, dividing the image between the great sky and foreground (**Figure 6.21**); even though this breaks the rule of composition that states you cannot have the horizon line in the center. Take a look at the three horizon frames and decide for yourself which one you like best. There is no right or wrong answer; it's all a matter of personal preference.

**FIGURE 6.19**

A low horizon emphasizes the sky.







ISO 100  
1/60 sec.  
f/11  
17mm lens

**FIGURE 6.20**  
A high horizon emphasizes the reflection in the wet sand.



ISO 100  
1/60 sec.  
f/11  
17mm lens

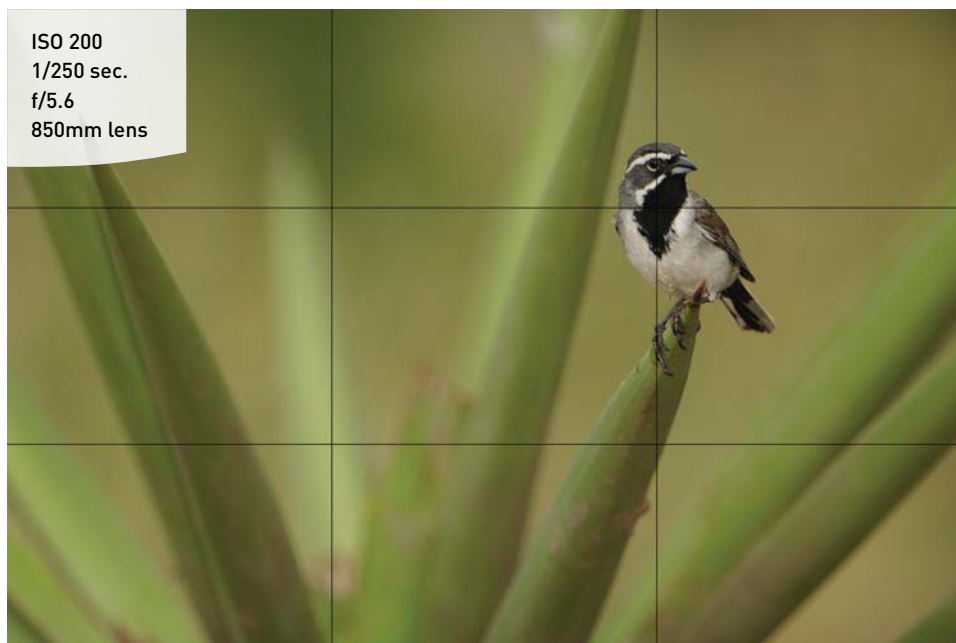
**FIGURE 6.21**  
A centered horizon divides the frame between the sky and reflection in the wet sand.

## SUBJECT PLACEMENT

Where you place your subject in the frame affects the impact of the scene. The rule of thirds states that you should place your subject in one of the four corners that dissect the image into thirds when you divide the frame with three horizontal and three vertical sections (**Figure 6.22**). I say, if it works, go for it! Another rule states that your subject should not be in the center of the frame. Although that is good advice for most situations, one of the strongest compositions is one in which the subject is dead center, filling the frame (**Figure 6.23**). Talk about impact!

**FIGURE 6.22**

A black-throated sparrow fits into the upper right intersection of the rule-of-thirds grid.





**FIGURE 6.23**  
Centering the owl  
in the frame makes  
for a dramatic  
composition that  
breaks the rules.

ISO 200  
1/20 sec.  
f/5.6  
550mm lens

# Chapter 6 Assignments

The following exercises are just a start on your journey to better composition. Take time to complete the assignments before moving on to the next chapter. As you work through each assignment, you will gain a better understanding of what works and what doesn't when composing your photographs to achieve the greatest impact.

## Visual Depth

Using your widest lens, work a scene by moving in close to the foreground elements and shooting with a small aperture. Take one frame at the distance you feel most comfortable, and then take a step closer and shoot another frame. Take a couple of steps back and shoot one more frame. Compare the differences that moving just a few feet makes in your composition.

## Perspective

Find subjects that are low to the ground, such as children, some birds, pets, and so on. Shoot from your full height looking down on your subject, and then get down to your subject's eye level and take a few more shots. Compare the difference in perspective that can be gained by shooting from different heights.

## Horizon

When you have a scene that has an interesting foreground as well as an interesting sky, take three frames: one with the horizon low in the frame, emphasizing the sky; one with it high in the frame, emphasizing the foreground; and one with the horizon centered in the frame, dividing the image in two with equal parts sky and foreground. Which image has the strongest impact? Are more than one equally compelling? If so, why? This exercise will help you to see your compositions at the point of capture rather than later in the digital darkroom when it's too late.

*Share your results with the book's Flickr group!*

*Join the group here: [flickr.com/groups/composition\\_fromsnapshottogreatshots](https://www.flickr.com/groups/composition_fromsnapshottogreatshots)*

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ISO 200  
1/250 sec.  
f/2.8  
70mm lens



# Black and White

## LEARNING TO SEE IN BLACK AND WHITE

By John Batdorff

In the digital age, black-and-white photography is as popular as ever, and the good news is that it's never been easier to create stunning black-and-white images. Although the process of digital black-and-white photography is different from film, what makes a good image remains the same. We need to keep our eyes peeled for elements like tonal contrast, strong lines, patterns, shapes, and texture. We need to learn to see in grayscale. Postprocessing has also never been easier; we have access to amazing software that allows us to bring out the best in our black-and-white images. In this chapter, we'll go through my personal process for shooting black and white—from what I look for before I press the shutter button, to what I do for postprocessing, to my entire gear list for getting the perfect shot.

## PORING OVER THE PICTURE



Notice how I used  
the street lights and  
the fog to create a  
dramatic effect.

● — I had to shoot this at a high ISO of 1000 using a tripod and a cable release.



The fog diffuses the lamplights, creating a soft glow.

ISO 1000  
1/25 sec.  
f/2.8  
27mm lens

## PORING OVER THE PICTURE

ISO 200  
1/80 sec.  
f/3.5  
16mm lens

The silhouetted mountains are  
what make this image work.



## WHEN TO GO BLACK AND WHITE

I am asked this question a lot: “John, when do you decide to process an image as black-and-white?”

My family has been involved in the newspaper business for well over 100 years. I grew up reading a newspaper, and I’ve seen my share of black-and-white photos. My mind is constantly in grayscale mode. The question for me isn’t when do I decide to shoot in black and white, but when do I decide an image will be processed as color. There’s something timeless about a good black and white, and in my mind there’s less to get wrong. Don’t get me wrong—I shoot plenty of color images. But getting color right and not dating your work in the process can be difficult. For me, black and white just feels natural. Without a doubt, there are some shots that are better suited as black and whites. The following outlines a few of my thoughts on identifying and capturing those very images.

## LEARNING TO LIVE AND SEE IN A BLACK-AND-WHITE WORLD

I rarely think about color. Instead, I’m stripping down the image in my head and categorizing it by its strengths. It takes a lot of practice to learn to see in black and white, but it can be done. I recommend practicing as often as possible, and you’ll see that you’ll get better with time. The best part of this practice is that it will not only strengthen your black-and-white images, but your color images as well. Black-and-white photography gives us a chance to take away a very important element—color—and focus on the other elements that are harder to envision. The following are a few things to be on the lookout for when learning to see in black and white.

### TONAL CONTRAST

Tonal contrast can be broken down into three categories: high, normal, and low. A high-tonal-contrast image consists primarily of white and black with very little gray. A normal-tonal-contrast image consists of a balance of all three. A low-tonal-contrast image can appear very flat since there’s little distinction between colors or tones within the image. I tend to enjoy images where the blacks are most certainly black and the whites are very white. Many of my images are of the high-tonal-contrast variety so that the other elements of the image, which I’ll talk about next, come through even stronger (**Figure 7.1**).



ISO 320  
1/80 sec.  
f/3.2  
85mm lens



**FIGURE 7.1**  
This image of Rodrigo is an example of very high tonal contrast. Check out how the whites and blacks are in strong contrast to one another, and how there's very little gray in the image.

The key to achieving this is to avoid colors with similar tonal ranges. For instance, if I'm shooting a dark red rose in front of dark green leaves, it's just not going to work as a black and white. When stripped of their color and examined as shades of gray, their tonal range is too similar; there's just not enough contrast there. If I were to shoot a white rose in front of dark green leaves, well, then I'd have the makings of a strong black-and-white image. Remember this when you are learning to see in black and white: Train your eye to look for variations in tone. Variations in color matter much less than variations in tone.

## TEXTURE

What the heck is texture? I know texture is one of those words that the artsy fartsy sorts love to throw around, and the definition can seem vague at best. It's real simple for me. If I see a barn and I can imagine running my hands over the aged, rough, splintered wood, that's texture. If I'm looking out over a field of wheat and I can imagine what it would feel like to run my hand over the top of the wheat, that's texture. It's something you can feel. Texture adds another dimension to an image,

making a black-and-white image come to life and giving it an almost three-dimensional feeling. One of the best ways to show texture is with comparison. The smooth, puffy clouds in the sky countered by the old rough wood of a barn and the wispy grass provide the distinction among the textures that makes it visually appealing (**Figure 7.2**). If an image has too many similar textures, it gets too busy and becomes uninteresting. When playing with texture, work with contrasting textures within the same image to give it that extra something.

### FIGURE 7.2

This image is almost three-dimensional. Here I tried to bring to life the textures in the barn, the clouds, and the grass so that it feels as though you're standing there and could touch the barn yourself.



## LIGHT

The golden hours—those first or last few hours of light during the day when the angle of the sun is low and the light is soft—are the magical hours to photograph textures. This is when scouting a location can truly pay off. If I find a location that has a lot of texture—for instance, a field of wheat planted on rolling hills—I make a mental note and come back to shoot it during the golden hours. And, yes, I'll even use my tripod (I'll discuss the use of tripods a little later).

The same lighting works great for portraits. The softer light of early morning and late afternoon shows more contrast and texture in a person's face. It can act to soften the skin or bring out the rough texture of sun-aged skin that has a real story to tell.

If your goal is to throw a lot of shadows or photograph something stark and barren, you'll occasionally want to shoot in the bright, harsh light of mid-afternoon. There is no such thing as bad light; you just have to know what the different types of light will do to your image and be ready to show up when you have the best light for the image that you want (**Figure 7.3**).



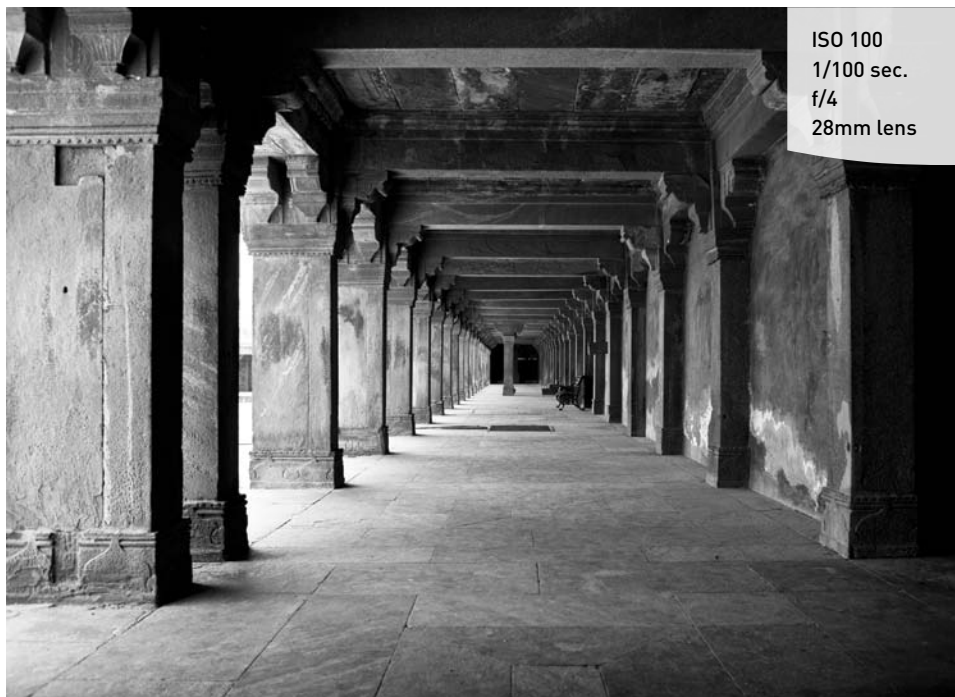
**FIGURE 7.3**  
What really made this image work for me was the incredible light. The park lights were diffused by the fog, creating a soft glow that silhouetted the trees perfectly.

## SHAPES AND PATTERNS

Shapes and patterns become even more evident in black-and-white photography. In fact, along with texture, they play the lead role. Keep your eyes peeled for repeating shapes, leading lines, and patterns. They make a big impact when you are viewing the landscape in black and white. For example, in **Figure 7.4**, the pillars create a very nice line for your eyes to follow. This line adds depth to the image while at the same time maintaining a solid frame. The pillars also have a strong shape and are arranged in a repeating pattern. Also, notice the light: When shooting architecture, I like to look for strong lines and shapes that are complemented by shadows that pull the viewers' eyes through a frame. If the pillars of the Agra Fort hadn't had strong shadows on the backside, they wouldn't have been nearly as effective at creating a strong leading line. It's key to keep your eye out for interesting light, such as strong shadows, when you're shooting lines, shapes, and patterns. As you can see, color doesn't matter in the image because the other elements are so strong. Preserving the color would only have taken something away from the final image.

## FIGURE 7.4

This image of the Agra Fort in India caught my eye because of the strong lines, the shapes of the pillars, and the repeating pattern. What made it really great is the perfect lighting that created the dramatic shadows.



ISO 100  
1/100 sec.  
f/4  
28mm lens

## PORTRAITS

I remember as a child looking at a black-and-white portrait my mother took of an oil-field worker. The image was extremely powerful. I couldn't stop staring at his face; I studied every little feature and found myself wondering what it was like to be him. A black-and-white portrait can be very powerful—once you strip an image of its color and free the mind of distractions, you truly begin to see things for what they are. I like to think of it as redirecting the visual conversation.

The Indian man in **Figure 7.5** is an excellent example. He is wearing a bright yellow turban, and the background is very colorful, which I found to be a distraction. To me, the story is in his face, not the colorful surroundings. With the color eliminated, the viewer is drawn into the man's face and eyes.

The Peruvian woman in **Figure 7.6** is wearing a bright traditional hat and clothing. When the image is converted to black and white, the focus falls off the clothing and is redirected to her eyes and the lines on her face. When you're composing a black-and-white image, always remember to ask yourself what the real story is. If color isn't the story, go ahead and leave it out. In doing so, you can make a good image really great.



ISO 200  
1/80 sec.  
f/4.5  
63mm lens



**FIGURE 7.5**  
India is such a colorful country, but in this image the color was too distracting, so converting it to black and white just felt natural.

ISO 200  
1/200 sec.  
f/9  
70mm lens



**FIGURE 7.6**  
This woman was going about her day on the streets of Cusco, Peru. She was dressed in traditional colorful Peruvian clothing, but what compelled me to photograph her was her face. I knew that converting to black and white would allow me to tell the story as I felt it.

## DRAMATIC LANDSCAPES

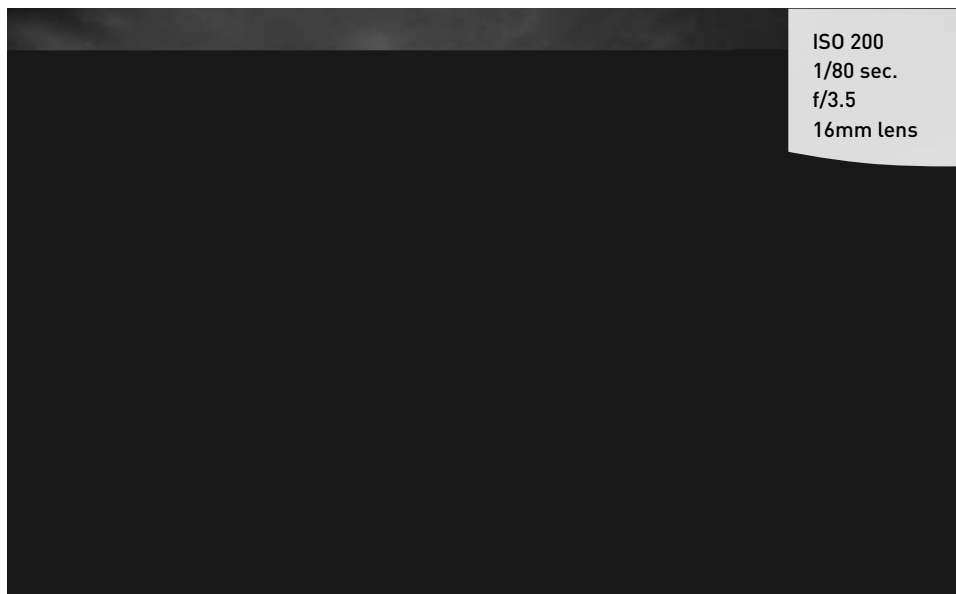
Learn to embrace nasty weather. If you follow my blog ([batdorffphotography.com/blog](http://batdorffphotography.com/blog)), you know I love bad weather. Yep, it's official: I'm a storm chaser with a camera in tow. I'm a big fan of dramatic black-and-white landscapes, and nothing shouts "drama" louder than billowing dark clouds. I love it when the first word that comes to mind when I see clouds is "ominous." It doesn't get more dramatic than that.

Often when I'm out in the western United States shooting landscapes, I try to capitalize on the inclement weather. If the forecast calls for snow, rain, or better yet, severe thunderstorms, I'm ready to roll. Of course, you have to be careful not to put yourself in a precarious situation with lightning, but using some common sense can put you in a great spot when the amazing clouds come rolling in (**Figure 7.7**). Typically, I'll shoot with my 16–35mm lens so that I can adjust the focal range on the fly. And if I want the clouds even darker, I'll use my Lee Filters graduated neutral density filter.

A dramatic sky gives an extra "wow" factor to an already beautiful landscape. Remember to take the sky into consideration when shooting black and white. I'll discuss "active" skies in more detail later, but just think about the extra contrast and texture that you are putting into your image when the clouds are telling a story all by themselves. Active weather almost always makes for an extraordinary black-and-white landscape.

### FIGURE 7.7

I was in the Tetons on my way to go backpacking when this storm rolled in. What drew me to this shot was the contrast between the dark clouds and the splinter of sunlight silhouetting the mountains.





## APPROACHING THE SHOT

Truth be told, many of my landscape images are taken while I'm on the road traveling across country. And they're often taken right off the highway (**Figure 7.8**). Just admit it: How often have you seen an amazing landscape right from the comfort of your car? Here's the key: stop and take the shot. I tell myself that life is short, and I want to remember this moment. To me, photography is more than just an art form, it's a documentation of our experiences. Remember that the only bad image is the one that's never taken. It seems almost too simple to say, but if you want to get great landscape shots, you first need to take the shots!



ISO 200  
1/320 sec.  
f/7.1  
35mm lens

**FIGURE 7.8**

When I was driving through eastern Idaho one late summer afternoon, these wheat fields drew me in. The way the light was hitting the rolling hills and the texture of the wheat were so perfect I had to stop the car.

Before I bring out all my gear, I start off by viewing the scene through the camera. Whenever I approach a landscape image for the first time, I always check to see if what I'm seeing will translate well in the camera. Sometimes scenes just don't work. Any number of factors can prevent a good shot, but more often than not it's a depth-of-field or distortion issue. The subject can be too far away to translate well, or I just can't seem to get the right perspective to make it work. I might swap lenses to check focal length, but that's about it; once you break out the tripod, it's like agreeing to pick someone up at the airport—it's a commitment.

But what's the worst that can happen? You take a little extra time to take in a beautiful view. Despite all the cries from your family, pull over and at least take a look to see if you can get the shot. You'll be happier because you tried, and you can always bribe them with ice cream down the road.

## ONCE I'M COMMITTED: MY THOUGHT PROCESS

Once I commit to taking a photo, I try to create a vision for the final image. These are the steps that help me form that vision.

### WHAT IS THE ORIENTATION OF THE SHOT?

Will a vertical or horizontal orientation suit my subject? Where am I placing the subject in the frame? This is where the rule of thirds comes into play, big time. If I have an image that is symmetrical, typically I'll compose with the subject in the center of the frame. If I want to create a more dynamic feel, I'll place the subject on either side of the frame. In **Figure 7.9**, I wanted to create a pensive feel. I took a visual cue from the subject—the cowboy's hat, tipped down to the right, and his body language, which felt dramatic. The angle of his hat and also his demeanor supported the use of negative space, allowing me to create a more dramatic feeling in the final image.

#### FIGURE 7.9

This image of a dancer was taken in Mexico. He was a dramatic performer, and I wanted to capture that. I used negative space to help create a sense of movement and drama. This is also a high-tonal-contrast image; there is only stark black and white with very little gray.



If you're unsure of your framing, look through the viewfinder both ways and see which orientation is more pleasing to your eye. Ask yourself, "What is it I'm trying to achieve?" Move the subject around the frame and take a gut check. You might not know exactly why (technically speaking) a certain orientation looks right, but chances are that what looks right to you is right. Trust your gut.

### **SLOW DOWN**

If there's one basic message I try to push in my seminars, it is this: Take it slow. There's no need to rush. Chances are, unless you're standing on the San Andreas Fault during an earthquake, nothing is going to move anytime soon. (But if you are, get to a safe place and then shoot like crazy!) Take your time. Ask yourself what it is that's drawn you to this spot? Is this the right time of day to be shooting? Will you have a chance to return?

## **WHICH LENS WILL DO THE ORIENTATION JUSTICE?**

Ninety percent of the time when I'm shooting landscapes, I'm using my 16–35mm (**Figure 7.10**). For portraiture I love my 85mm, and many people use a 50mm. You want to be able to fill the frame with your subject while deciding how much background or environmental information you want in the shot. Sometimes with a portrait you want to fill the frame entirely with a person's face; other times the photo tells a much stronger story when you leave in some part of the environment. Remember to think about what the story really is, and make sure you only put pertinent information in the frame, leaving out all the unimportant elements. In addition, with black-and-white photography, positioning a subject to enhance negative space can lead to a very powerful image. Having a stark black or pure white background for your subject can make for a great image. Remember this when choosing your lens and focal length. Remember, too, that black-and-white imagery is all about stripping down an image to tell a powerful story. Negative space can not only add tonal contrast to your image, but it can also add to the power of the story. A busy background or foreground only adds unnecessary information and clutters the story.

### FIGURE 7.10

This image was taken on a bitterly cold winter day in Chicago. Aside from some brave runners, I was the only person at the lakeshore. The high contrast and negative space of the bright white snow versus the gray sky and water told a story of a cold, desolate pier. The strong lines leading into nowhere added to the story as well.



## DO I NEED MY TRIPOD AND CABLE RELEASE?

Not if I have good light and will be shooting at a fast enough shutter speed that it doesn't matter or that depth of field isn't critical. In reality, I prefer shooting without my tripod because it gives me the ability to move freely and frequently change my point of view to get it just right. Moving a tripod around can break my rhythm, so if it's not necessary, I'll avoid using it.

I do need my tripod and cable release if I'm shooting in a low-light situation and want to keep my ISO low so the image doesn't get grainy, or if I need to bracket for an HDR shot. When shooting in low light, you can choose to either slow down your shutter speed or increase your ISO. When you slow down your speed, you can easily get blur from camera shake, so a tripod is a must.

The other time I definitely need a tripod is if depth of field is critical and I want a super-sharp image. There is no way to hold your camera as steady as a tripod can, so sometimes you just have to break down and use it.

## DO I NEED MY GRADUATED NEUTRAL DENSITY FILTERS?

Not when the sky is perfect. In my images, I usually have “active clouds” that don’t need to be enhanced. By “active clouds” I mean those that grab your attention. If you’re saying, “Wow, look at that sky!” those are active clouds. A perfect blue sky can be equally as beautiful, but it doesn’t offer much contrast when converted to black and white. A blue sky will be a solid tone, so a sky with active clouds creates a nice tonal and textural contrast.

I will use my graduated neutral density filters when I have a very dull or hazy sky that needs to be enhanced, or a very bright sky that needs to be darkened—or dark clouds that I want to make even darker.

## IMAGE STABILIZATION: ON OR OFF?

It’s on if I’m hand-holding my camera. It’s off when I’m shooting with a tripod.

## MY STANDARD CAMERA SETTINGS

Once I’ve committed to the shot, I need to decide on what camera settings I’ll be using.

### ISO

I change my ISO according to available light and my aperture needs. In good light I typically shoot with an ISO of 100. I will push my ISO up to 1600 in low-light conditions if I’m shooting freehand. Otherwise, I’ll use a tripod and try to keep my ISO at 400 and below. I’m not a huge fan of digital noise, and as you increase your ISO, it’s more likely that you’ll see noise. Sometimes a noisy photo is desirable, if you’re going for that look. If not, this is another good time to bust out the tripod.

### APERTURE PRIORITY SHOOTING MODE

This is my primary shooting mode. The reason I love aperture priority is that it allows me to focus on my creativity. It’s a gift from the camera gods, folks. Think about it. You set your ISO, and then all you need to worry about is your aperture. If I want a shallow depth of field (meaning things close to me in focus and the background blurry), I use a large aperture. If I want a deeper depth of field (meaning more in-focus details throughout the image), I use a smaller aperture (like f/16). The camera handles the rest. As you work the aperture, the camera adjusts the shutter speed accordingly. A

general rule I follow is this: Don't hand-hold your camera at speeds below the focal length of the lens—for example, using an 120mm lens would mean not going slower than 1/120th of a second—and never go lower than 1/60th of a second unless you want a blurry image.

## METERING MODE

Eighty percent of my photography is shot in the evaluative metering mode because it takes into consideration the entire frame of the image. For my landscape images I use this mode almost exclusively.

If I'm shooting a portrait that is backlit, I'll use the partial metering mode (**Figure 7.11**).

### FIGURE 7.11

This environmental portrait was shot in New Orleans' Jackson Square district. The trombone player was backlit, so using the partial metering mode helped me achieve the perfect exposure.





## WHITE BALANCE

I'm a white-balance freak. I'm one of those people who would rather adjust the white balance up front in my camera than mess with it in postprocessing. You can either select from one of the many white-balance presets that come with your camera, or you can create a custom white balance. I use an ExpoDisc to create a custom white balance; another inexpensive option is a Lally cap. Having the correct white balance is key in reviewing your work on your LCD. If your white balance is way off, chances are that when you review your image on the camera's LCD, you're not getting the true picture. This can affect your exposure and other adjustments that you make on the fly.

Another important thing to remember is that getting the correct white balance isn't only for color photography. If your white balance is off, it could change the tonal range of the objects you're shooting. In turn, this can change the way the image looks when you convert to black and white. So take the time to adjust your white balance in the camera before taking the shot. You won't regret it.

## DO I NEED TO BRACKET THE EXPOSURE?

Bracketing the exposure is key when I'm just not sure where my exposure needs to be. I'm a control freak, and the only way you would get me to jump out of a plane is if I were equipped with a parachute, an emergency chute, and a safety net anxiously awaiting my arrival. Auto Exposure Bracketing (AEB) is a photographer's safety net for exposure. If you're not quite sure where you need to be on exposure, remember this: When in doubt, bracket about. You'll be dealing with a few extra files, but chances are you won't lose out on an image due to poor exposure.

I will bracket if after taking a few test shots and looking at the histogram, I'm still not sure about the exposure. A good histogram is as important in black-and-white photography as it is in color. Remember that when in doubt, bracket the shot.

If, after a few test shots, the exposure looks decent, I won't do any bracketing.

## HDR ISN'T ONLY FOR COLOR!

When most people think of high dynamic range (HDR), they tend to think of saturated color photos. But an HDR color photo converted to black and white can make for a unique look. Granted, on occasion HDR can be overdone, but I think you'll find in **Figure 7.12** it doesn't look fake. It can create a very dynamic photograph.

Here's the setup:

1. Place your camera on a tripod (yep, this is the time to use it).
2. Shoot in aperture priority mode to maintain the same depth of field.
3. Set your camera to continuous shooting mode.
4. Set your camera to bracketing mode, allowing for 3-5 images separated by +1 and -1 stops.
5. Lock your camera's mirror to reduce mirror shake.
6. Use a cable release to reduce hand shake.
7. Compose your image.
8. Take your shots.

How I process the image:

1. Import the photos into Adobe Lightroom.
2. Select the bracketed images and export them into Photomatix.
3. Create a color HDR.

Import the HDR back into Lightroom and convert it to black and white either manually or using a preset.



**FIGURE 7.12**  
The “Bean” is an often-captured image in Chicago. To give my version a unique look, I chose to shoot it at night and then convert it to black and white. This increased the contrast within the image. (This image is actually what I call a “dirty HDR.” I used one image and created two virtual copies—at +1 and -1 exposures—and then merged them.)

## POSTPROCESSING FOR BLACK AND WHITE

Do you remember when you first started taking digital pictures? I do. I remember looking at my color images and saying, “Man, these look flat.” So, like any beginner, I focused on one setting and one setting alone: Saturation. Guess what? My images were no longer flat—possibly a little cartoonish, but no one could call them flat.

The hard, cold fact is that to get good at anything it takes time and experimentation. If you’re new to black and white, I have one word for you: contrast (**Figure 7.13**). If you use Lightroom, Photoshop, Aperture, or even free software like Picasa, they all have contrast adjustments. Start there.

### FIGURE 7.13

If there's one word you should remember from this chapter, it's "contrast." If you're starting out, don't be afraid of the Contrast slider when processing your images. That is the single most important place to start your postprocessing for black-and-white images.



## SOFTWARE

I use two basic programs for all my black-and-white conversions: Adobe Photoshop Lightroom and Nik Software's Silver Efex Pro.

I start out by importing my raw files into Lightroom. I only worry about three basic adjustments at this stage. First, is my exposure where I want it to be? Second, I typically always add a little black into the photo at this stage with Lightroom's Blacks slider in the Develop module. If you want to take it up a level, focus on the tone curve. I like to work the Lights and Darks sliders in Lightroom. Third, I crop the image if needed. Then I export the photo into Nik Software's Silver Efex Pro. Now, some of you might be asking, "Why do you leave Lightroom?" Well, it's true, Lightroom does a great job with black-and-white conversion. But I'm a visual guy, and I love how Nik Software converts the black and white and provides you with several visual options that you can tailor to your taste.

## MY KIT

Many people think that in order to take a really good landscape shot they need to have a ton of gear. Well, in some cases, that may be true. But often, working with a simple pack can get the job done. To be totally honest, many of my shots are taken with my Canon 5D and my 16–35mm lens—no filters, no tripod, not even a lens hood. Getting a good shot isn't always about the equipment; it's simply about being in the right place at the right time and then knowing what to do when you're there.

Here are a few recommendations to help ensure you'll get the shot right:

- Invest in a bubble level. Even with a tripod, it's easy to set up on uneven ground. Nothing is worse than shooting a beautiful landscape image only to find that it's sloping to one side or the other.
- Use a cable release or remote trigger. Especially for long exposure settings, a cable release is key.
- Buy a tripod that you'll use. Listen, this isn't an inexpensive hobby you've taken on. It can suck your wallet dry, so invest in the things that make sense. A good tripod will set you back a few bucks, but like luggage, you'll have it for the rest of your life and you'll use it. I love my carbon-fiber Gitzo GT-1550 Traveler. Carbon fiber is strong enough to hold even the heaviest of lenses but light enough to put on my backpack for long backcountry excursions.
- Get a decent ball head for your tripod. I use a Really Right Stuff BH-40.
- Use an L-bracket, so when you change from portrait to landscape you don't have to recompose your image.
- Invest in a graduated neutral density filter. I use the LEE Filters system.
- Use a grid focusing screen. Folks, this is probably the one item I love the most. If your camera doesn't already have a grid focusing screen, consider picking one up. I use an Eg-D Precision Matte Focusing Screen for my Canon 5D Mark II. This is a great way to see the rules of thirds in-camera as you're composing your shot.

### A COUPLE OF TAKE-HOME TIPS

- **Travel light.** But no lighter! Leave the tripod behind. Yep, I said it. If you don't need it, don't bring it. I have the sexiest tripod known to humankind, but there are many moments that it simply gets in the way. Sometimes having the ability to move freely and unencumbered outweighs the benefits of a steady shot.
- **Buy quality glass.** Invest in a good lens. A quality lens improves the microcontrast of black-and-white images. You can really feel the textures when you have good contrast.

## BREAK THE RULES AND HAVE FUN

Much of what I know has come from years of experience. My photographic journey is probably much like yours. I've stumbled along the learning curve, picking up pieces of knowledge here and there in an effort to become better at my craft. Getting where I am today has required tons of practice, and most of all, dedication. I've learned many rules along the way for getting a great shot, but if there is one thing I've concluded, it's this: Break the rules!

Rules are wonderful. They provide order, secure us with a blanket of comfort from the unknown, and most important, they provide us with guidelines to break! Much of this book is dedicated to rules. Embrace them, learn from them. But remember to break them from time to time, too. Photography is about having fun and growing. If you're always preoccupied by rules, you'll fail to see the bigger picture, which is learning to experiment and create a style all your own. That's right: experimentation! Take a few risks. Dare I say it—try splitting a horizon or two. You'll never get better at this if you're not willing to make mistakes. I've failed miserably many times, but for every hundred mistakes I get one killer image! So take a few risks. Start by focusing on one rule or suggestion at a time, and have a little fun.



# Chapter 7 Assignments

Before you move on to the next chapter, be sure to complete the following assignments.

## Seeing the Light

Try photographing the same image three times: once in the morning, once during midday, and once in the evening. Then compare the light. You'll see the difference that the time of day can make on how an image looks. Seeing is believing!

## Mine Your Archive

Fire up your postprocessing software and start making black and whites today. Take some of your favorites shots and see how they look in black and white. Better yet, take a photograph that just didn't work in color and convert it to black and white. You might just surprise yourself—I know I have.

## Throw a Filter on It

If you want to get creative in-camera, throw a red filter on your lens. Red filters will add contrast to many black-and-white images, and can create very compelling pictures.

*Share your results with the book's Flickr group!*

*Join the group here: [flickr.com/groups/composition\\_fromsnapshotstogreatshots](https://www.flickr.com/groups/composition_fromsnapshotstogreatshots)*

ISO 200  
1/3200 sec.  
f/3.5  
300mm  
f/2.8 lens



# Sports and Composition

## A TOTALLY DIFFERENT ANIMAL

By Rick Rickman

I've been a sports photographer for 33 years now. It's one genre of photography that I truly love. It can be (and it has been for me) one of the most challenging genres to try to master; all the demands of photography come into play at such a high rate of speed.

When I was asked to write about sports and composition, I was a bit dubious at first. I wrestled with how to best describe the processes involved in making the decisions that affect the outcome and determine the success of the pictures produced. The compositional elements are all the same; we still have to think about the aspects of composition that have been discussed throughout this book. But the process of preparing for what to shoot in relation to the activity is so much more extensive when it comes to sports and action photography.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I'll admit that I decided that the best way I could come to terms with describing how composition works in relation to sports photography was to tell a few stories about how I've been able to capture some of my best images over the many years of my career. I hope you find the stories interesting and the lessons useful in the pursuit of your work with sports as well.

**PORING OVER THE PICTURE**

ISO 200  
1/80 sec.  
f/5.6  
200mm lens

## PORING OVER THE PICTURE

The image of the baseball player hiding behind his clothes in the locker before the game was one I had to have, and the light in the locker room was so low that I had to figure out how to make the picture work. It had such a funny twist to it that I knew the viewers of this story would appreciate the dilemma of this very nervous player. I ended up using a strobe to raise the light level to a usable level. I knew there was an element of risk using the strobe because it might bother the player, but taking the chance paid off. I tried a wide-angle lens first, but there were other players on either side of him that I found to be a distraction. I switched to an 85mm to eliminate the other players.

Using the strobe helped keep \_\_\_\_\_  
the quality of the image high.

Bouncing the flash off the \_\_\_\_\_  
ceiling helped even out the  
light, and using a slower  
shutter speed helped  
balance the strobe with the  
ambient light.

Using a wide-angle lens \_\_\_\_\_  
helped give the image a  
sense of place, but the  
players on either side of  
him were a distraction so I  
changed the lens to an 85mm  
to tighten up a bit and help  
the composition.



ISO 200  
1/30 sec.  
f/2.8  
85mm lens

# LEARNING TO HANDLE THE COMPLEXITIES OF SPORTS PHOTOGRAPHY

When it comes to sports, there's so much more to think about. If you're shooting portraits, landscapes, still lifes, weddings, or your family members, things move at a much more manageable pace. There's often ample time to think about how the compositional elements within your frame are working together.

On the other hand, the reasons so many people are attracted to shooting sports are the very same reasons that it is, compositionally speaking, so taxing. The speed and motion of sports complicate factors that can be difficult to address if you aren't prepared. I refer to sports photography as "Potential Compositional Anarchy."

## ONE SIMPLE EXERCISE

Good sports photography is all about adapting to speed and motion. To prepare you a bit for what we are about to address, I'd like you to try an exercise that I repeatedly use to keep my eye sharp and my compositional reaction time tuned. It's a home shooting exercise that can help improve your images and your ability to compose at a high speed.

Take the longest lens you have—preferably a 200mm or longer lens—and go to the corner of a very busy intersection near your house. Stand on the corner of the intersection closest to oncoming traffic. Begin to focus on cars entering the intersection, keeping the face of the driver framed and focused in your viewfinder while tracking the car all the way through the intersection.

If you are able to keep the image of the driver's face framed well and in focus for at least four or five frames, you are doing well and sports photography will be easy for you. If, on the other hand, you have trouble framing and focusing during these attempts, it's a good idea to continue to try this exercise regularly until you can consistently deliver on those four or five frames.

I always suggest this exercise to photographers because it's a real-world example of what a photographer can expect to encounter when dealing with the challenges of sports photography. It's also a great tool to use to improve your hand-eye coordination—which will improve your ability to follow-focus—as well as your ability to frame the shot.

## DEALING WITH SPEED

In sports photography, one of the most important aspects of successful pictures is the photographer's sense of anticipation. A good sense of anticipation can be supplemented and accentuated by a working knowledge of the sport you're shooting. Staying tuned in to information of the sport or game can be important because any insight that puts you in a great location to make a unique image is a true advantage. Positioning is often one key to great pictures, and it improves your composition as well. Finding a location with a good background is essential. If a background is a problem, making an appropriate lens choice to help diminish the effect of a busy background is crucial. And there's another important element that so many photographers dismiss, but that I find to be immensely useful: intuition. Intuition is a key ingredient to success. In many cases, it isn't cultivated nearly as much as it should be.

I've been fortunate to cover 14 Olympic competitions in my career. In Athens in 2004, I had the great good fortune to be listening intently to the little intuitive voice in my head as it clearly told me that I needed to be close to the start of the women's 100 meter hurdles. I knew I was going to cover that event because one of my favorite women athletes, Gail Devers, was competing; it would probably be her last Olympic effort ever. Little did I know how important listening to that voice would be.

There's always an incredible amount of energy at any Olympic competition, but when your intuition is screaming at you to get to a certain place because something important is going to happen, it makes it that much more intense. I went to a shooting position just two hurdles down track from the starting area and lay out my camera gear.

In sports photography, there are so many things to think about compositionally, but one that is always essential is perspective. What are you trying to say with the image, and how should you shoot it to make the image best work? Perspective relates to everything in life; all our decisions are directly determined by how we choose to look at things. The same is true for photography! The angle of view we choose creates its own viewpoint and level of communication. That's perspective!

There are at least six distinct perspectives, or points of view, that always need to be considered in connection to compositions and how they relate to picture and storytelling communications. Those six points of view include wide view, medium view, tight view, high angles, low angles, and details. These elements of perspective are always running around in my head, and on this night at the Olympics I was calculating what I needed to do to create a variety of perspectives from this race.

I grabbed my 400mm lens and put on a 1.4 teleconverter because I wanted to be sure to get a very tight shot of Devers. She has extremely long fingernails, and the image in **Figure 8.1** always captivates people. As the competitors prepared to come to their starting blocks, I began to shoot Devers with the long lens.

**FIGURE 8.1**

The tight view.



I kept telling myself that the long lens would help eliminate much of what could be a potentially distracting background, and it seemed to work. My mind was racing because I knew there were just a few minutes until the competitors would be called to their starting blocks. I wanted to be sure that I had the appropriate lens to shoot the first three hurdles of the race.

I chose to put a 70–200mm f/2.8 lens on the second camera body and a 200mm f/2 lens on yet a third camera body. I figured this combination would give me plenty of options, depending on what unfolded. There was one last thought that bounced through my head before the gun went off: What can I do to convey a sense of speed and motion in these images? I made a conscious decision to shoot at a slower shutter speed and pan with the action, which would also effectively help clean up a bad background by blurring it (**Figure 8.2**).



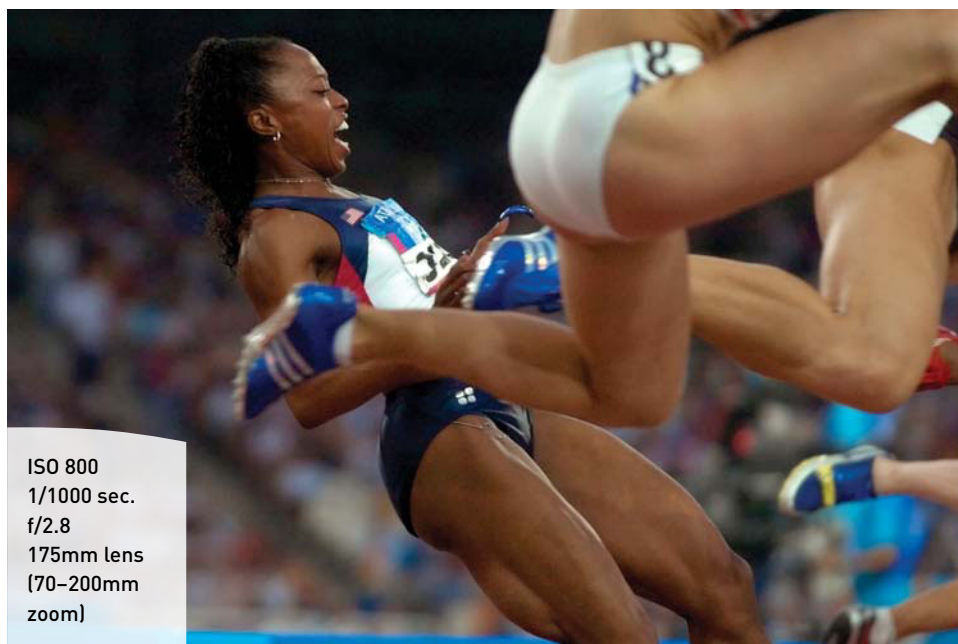
**FIGURE 8.2**  
The medium view. I decided to shoot at a slow shutter speed to enhance the sense of speed, as well as help clean up a seriously troublesome background.

The gun went off. She approached the first hurdle and I knew something was wrong. She began to pull up (**Figure 8.3**). The little voice in my head was screaming. All my senses were lit up like fireworks on the fourth of July. When I'm in that state of mind, it always seems like time actually slows down and things seem to move in slow motion. I saw Devers wince and try to stop before she made contact with the first hurdle in her lane, but she was unsuccessful and went down hard, grabbing the cross-member of the hurdle (**Figures 8.4 and 8.5**).

As Devers collapsed to the track clutching the hurdle, my mind was in hyperdrive. What did I just experience? Will this be a defining moment in this Olympic competition? Did I make the right lens choices for the composition? I was pretty sure the images were successful. Devers lay on the track for some time after the crash, and that image was the one that most other photographers ended up with. I felt a huge smile cross my face as I realized that there was only one other shooter of the 400 credentialed photographers at these Olympics shooting this scene from my location—and the look on his face told me he hadn't had such a great experience with this situation. A good sense of anticipation and planning had helped me capture a classic Olympic moment almost exclusively.

The one detail that is hard to imagine is the fact that the entire episode of Dever's crash took place in less than three seconds. This is why dealing with the intricacies of composition when shooting sports is such a different situation from other genres of photography.

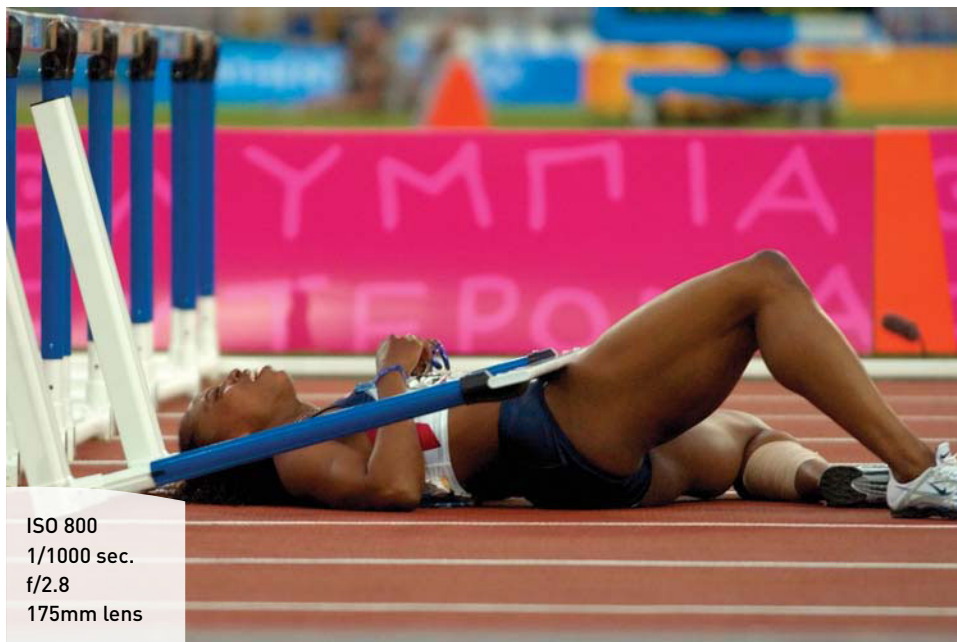
**FIGURE 8.3**  
The low angle.



**FIGURE 8.4**  
The medium view.







**FIGURE 8.5**  
Gail Dever's track career had come to an end as she lay under the hurdle in pain from her hamstring tear. Medical personnel came to her aid in just a few seconds, but her chance for a medal was gone.

## THE TWO MOST IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

I like to keep things simple. One of the most influential editors in my 33-year photographic career used to drum into my head the KISS theory of success: Keep It Simple Stupid. This little theory has helped me on so many occasions, and it's led me to understand that all any photographer has to do to really get the most from any given situation is ask two things of any scene: What am I seeing, and how do I make it work? The answers to these two questions are the compositional magic bullets that allow us to stay focused and think clearly as we shoot.

If you've been with your camera for any amount of time now, I know that you've experienced the following situation: You encounter a scene, something stops you, and the little voice in your head cries out, "Whoa dude, get your camera out, there's a picture here!" It's happened to you, right? Well, when that happens, the very next thing a photographer should do is ask, "What am I seeing?" This question creates a sense of focus that forces you to look closer at what it is in the scene that grabbed your attention. This is important; too often, novice photographers point their cameras toward what they believe to be the picture they think they want without thinking clearly about where the picture actually is in the context of the scene itself. Isolating what it is that you are subconsciously seeing is one of the most important aspects of great photography.

Once you've isolated what grabbed your attention, answering the second question—how do I make it work?—will help raise your pictures to an even higher, more insightful level. This question puts into play a series of thoughts that can make your next image very special indeed. Contemplating the answer to this question should get your mind racing. If you're attempting to find the successful solution, answering this question will put your head and feet in motion. How do I make what I'm seeing work in a best-case scenario?

This is the moment when all the synapses begin to fire and all the possible photographic techniques come into sharp focus. Questions will be rattling around in your skull. What's my best camera position? If I choose this camera position, which lens do I need to use? If I choose that lens, how should I frame this up? Is it best to use a rule-of-thirds composition or something else? All these questions fly through your mind in milliseconds. Suddenly, you begin to think logically about what it is you're going to do.

## THE ROAD TRIP TO ENLIGHTENMENT

Several years ago, I was asked by a popular publishing interest to follow a minor league baseball team for a few days for a book it was going to publish. The call came in at the last minute, and even though baseball isn't my favorite sport, I accepted the assignment. A mere five hours later I was on a plane to Salt Lake City to meet the members of a team I had never heard of and to be their best friend for three days. I'd never shot much baseball and was just a tad bit nervous about the whole situation.

When I landed in Salt Lake City, I was met by the sports information guy. As he quickly grabbed my bag, he told me that we were leaving on a bus to Medicine Hat, Canada, in 20 minutes, so I had to hurry—and, by the way, we would be on the bus for the better part of the day and night. I muttered to myself, "What a glamorous job I have..." as I headed out the baggage claim door with my cameras.

No sooner had I gotten to the parking lot of the ballpark than my bag was thrown into the baggage bay of the bus, and we were off to Medicine Hat for three days of on-the-road baseball.

The bus trip was one of the defining moments of my career because it was the first time that, on a daily basis, I had to ask myself the two important questions. I had been thrown into this assignment so quickly that I didn't have time to do my normal research, and I didn't really know anything about baseball. I was flying by the seat of my pants on a very important assignment.

I remember sitting at the back of the bus saying to myself, “This is a great story. I just have to figure out how to say what needs to be said about these guys so that everyone who sees these images will be able to feel what it’s like to be part of this team.” Pictures give visual voice to life’s experiences, and we need to keep in mind that the way pictures communicate is through feeling. Acknowledging this and working with it gives us our best chance for success.

As the bus headed up the highway, I asked myself, “How do I make what I’m seeing here work?” As time and the trip grew longer, the players settled in and attempted to find ways to rest and relax. At one point, the catcher for the team, the Trappers, climbed into the luggage rack above the seats. My heart started to race. I reached into my bag and grabbed the 24mm lens—and my flash, because I knew I would need to balance the light outside the bus with the little amount of light that was visible in the luggage rack. I knew I had a picture, but the question was how to make the picture captivating. I needed to wait for a moment.

I stood in the aisle of the bus for a long time. The catcher began to snore. His mouth was open and he was drooling a bit. I needed to show a sense of environment, so I decided to use that ol’ rule of thirds and fire off some frames. I got three shots before the catcher awoke and began to protest my photographing him this way. It didn’t matter, though, because I knew I had one telling image (Figure 8.6).



ISO 200  
1/60 sec.  
f/4.0  
18mm lens

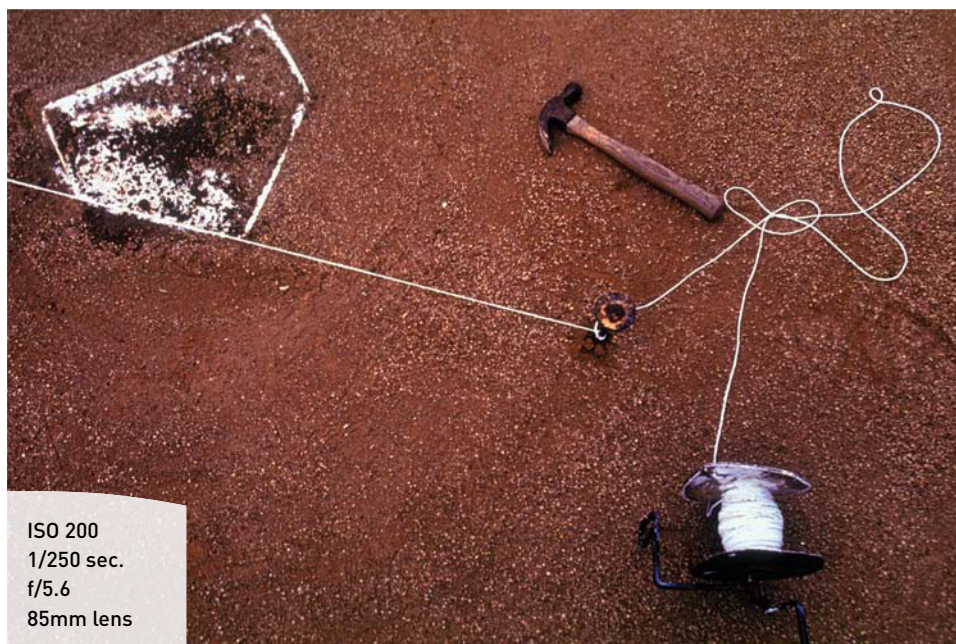
**FIGURE 8.6**  
A minor leaguer found a place to stretch out in the luggage rack of the bus as the team headed for Medicine Hat, Canada.

When the bus finally arrived at Medicine Hat, field preparation was just beginning. I was so glad to be off the bus that any excuse to move was the right one. I went out to visit with the groundskeepers. I watched as they prepped the field, and I began to see pictures everywhere. The one that really caught my eye was the detail of the well-worn, somewhat archaic equipment the field guys were using to line the bases.

Details are the descriptive adjectives of any picture story or essay. They help every story along. I loved the clean texture of the graveled ground, and all the pieces of equipment became graphic elements in the frame. That looming question came to mind again: How do I make this work? I began to think compositionally about the string as the leading line that seemed to tie all the graphic elements together. Then the only thing that remained was how to visually align the objects in the frame (Figure 8.7).

### FIGURE 8.7

The equipment used in the minor leagues to line the field of play.



I took a few frames and turned around to see another fabulous scene unfolding behind me. Some of the guys from the Trappers were coming out for batting practice and warm-up. It was late in the day, and the light was fabulous. That infamous golden hour was upon us, and I was in heaven.

The scene was perfect. I had no doubt about what I was going to do. Sometimes the obvious choice is the best choice, and I decided to let the detail element of the old, worn bat rack become the picture's leading line element, which brought the eye directly to the silhouetted figures on the beautiful purple color palette of the wall.



The rich, warm, late afternoon light gave such a marvelous aesthetic to the image that all I really had to do was record the beauty of the scene (**Figure 8.8**). After I captured this image I realized that this was going to be an amazing story; most of what I was going to photograph for this story would have very little to do with the action of baseball; instead, it would concentrate on the kinds of things that fans might normally overlook. The answers to the question, How do I make this work? was finally starting to come into shape for me.



ISO 200  
1/500 sec.  
f/5.6  
85mm lens

**FIGURE 8.8**  
The shadow from the late afternoon hour projects the shadows of two players conversing just before the start of another inning of play.

I experience a great sense of tranquility when I finally realize that I have a plan for covering an assignment or a story. And from that tranquility comes a real sense of creative freedom. I stop worrying so much about what it is I'm doing, and I think more about what it is I'm seeing and experiencing in the midst of new and exciting things. This was one of those few times when the creative insecurity faded away. I was beginning to see pictures everywhere. When your mind clears and you begin to have a sense of focus for the story, it becomes much easier to see how things fit.

I began to look for those great moments that happen in any event. Sometimes they occur on the field, but many times they happen off the field. Capturing great moments is the key to good coverage of any story; the more of those moments you can find, the greater the level of success you will have with the overall package. Before the game began, the San Diego Chicken was getting the crowd warmed up and thrilling the spectators with the typical threats of baby cannibalism—a classic crowd pleaser.

Sometimes a great way to achieve a unique image is just to observe the subject for a while before you actually pull the trigger. I shot a few frames of the Chicken as he worked the crowd, but mostly I watched him perform. I began to notice a pattern to his antics.

The Chicken would work small sections of the crowd, playing to specific personalities. He would interact with the young kids and make them laugh. I watched the Chicken head toward a small group in a lower section of the stands where a mom had a young baby on her lap. I had seen him work with another baby earlier and knew that he would most likely do something with this little one, too.

That nagging question jumped into my head again: How would I make this scene work better than the one I missed earlier? It was almost subconscious now, but I began to look at the faces in the crowd as the Chicken approached the section. I saw a family behind the woman with the baby and figured that the young boy would be very interested in the big mascot. I lined up so I would be in position to see the young boy and the Chicken in my pictures, and then waited. I wanted to be able to see the Chicken and the faces near him, so I decided to use my 70–200mm lens with an aperture setting of f/4, which would give me a decent amount of depth of field. I knew the heads of the people would become shapes and repetition of form, but what I didn't know until the moment unfolded was that I would get such a great reaction from the young boy in the foreground (**Figure 8.9**). People often refer to good images as a result of luck, but I believe that luck happens because of good placement and preparation—with a fair share of anticipation thrown in for good measure.

The one image from the story that really converted me to infinite belief in the two-question scenario was a shot that I was able to get inside the locker room of the Trappers just before the game. The room was small and—as you might imagine—there was a lot going on. But the one thing that really caught my eye was a young man who, according to his teammates, always got exceptionally nervous before the beginning of each game. He was sitting in his locker behind his clothes, hiding his head and trying to calm down.

There were two other players on either side of him preparing for the game, but the picture I really wanted was just the young man hiding his head. The scene stopped me. I started to raise my camera and then realized that the lens I was using was too wide to create the isolated feeling of the scene I wanted to capture. The wide-angle lens would have shown too much of the room—with both players on either side of the hiding subject—and would have diminished the impact of a more meaningful picture.



ISO 500  
1/500 sec.  
f/2.8  
300mm lens

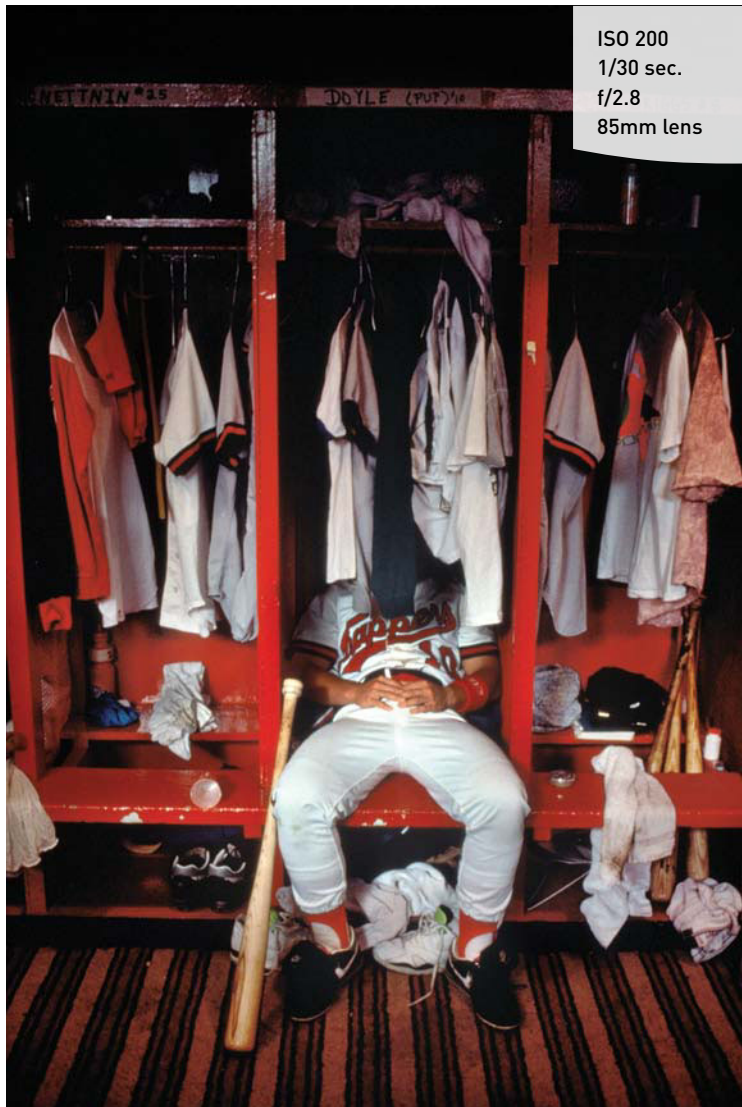


**FIGURE 8.9**  
The San Diego  
Chicken entertains  
the crowd by  
devouring a small  
bewildered child.

I quickly changed to an 85mm f/1.4 lens, which would give me a much tighter view of the man behind the clothes, concentrating the viewers' attention onto what I really wanted them to see. As I began to shoot, the two players on either side of the young man got up to go out to the field. So I backed up a little more and included the space of the lockers on either side of him; it felt like the added space would help enhance the feeling of isolation (**Figure 8.10**). It worked, and I came face to face with the fact that constantly asking those questions—What am I seeing? and How do I make it work?—makes all the difference in the world. In this case, the answer to those questions—the resulting picture—was quite nice.

### FIGURE 8.10

A very nervous player tries to find some solitude behind his clothes in his locker just before the start of the game.



ISO 200  
1/30 sec.  
f/2.8  
85mm lens

My favorite picture of the entire assignment came on the last day of my time with the Trappers. The team returned home for an evening game, and the weather was terrible. It was raining heavily and the winds were blowing as if they would become a tornado. However, an hour or so before game time the rain stopped and people filled the stands. The lights came on, and as the players took the field, the sun found an opening through the clouds just as it was beginning to sink below the horizon. The sky filled with the most vivid fuchsia color, one that defied description. It was as though the photographic gods had been waiting to see if I would give up on the day, and as a reward for putting up with the storm, they gave me a momentary present of ultimate beauty.

I was on the field when the color filled the sky, and I knew it would only be there for a very brief time. I quickly looked around to see what vantage points I could use to capture the beauty in the sky. For a moment I was a little panic-stricken because I could see the color begin to fade a bit. It was one of those times when if I didn't act quickly and correctly, I would lose a great moment.

I grabbed my camera and an 18mm lens. I raced into the stands and up to the announcer's booth. Before anyone could say a word I began to climb up the side of the booth using the conduit pole next to the booth's door. I got to the roof of the booth and shot off three frames. One turned out to be a bit out of focus. The second framed the shot a little too far to the left. The third had a good overall balance. I wanted the poles of the backstop to frame the field, and I wanted the leading lines of the ends of the grandstands at the field's edge to pull me out to the outfield and the mountains beyond. I feel like it worked; as you look at the image, it seems to have a fair sense of balance (**Figure 8.11**).



### FIGURE 8.11

The last rays of the day turned the sky over the field a brilliant fuchsia as the earlier rainstorm cleared the valley.



ISO 200  
1/60 sec.  
f/5.6  
18mm lens

## LEARNING LESSONS FROM YOUR MISTAKES

Photography is a wonderful developmental pursuit that can take you to great heights of self-expression, as long as you learn that any creative pursuit demands a sense of patience and persistence. There are stages of photography that we all go through, and the early ones can be the most taxing. No artist I know attained a position of great stature and recognition overnight. The creative process doesn't really kick in until you stop having to think about the fundamentals so intently.

It's when the fundamentals become rote that your mind can truly begin to embrace the aesthetic values of what you are seeing and to put all the principles discussed in this book to good use. One of the best ways to become better at anything is to practice, which means spending lots of time with the camera. Having said that, however, I must qualify it: Time spent with the camera isn't necessarily *quality* time spent.

If you go out and shoot pictures in the afternoon, and then go home and don't bother to spend the time examining the results of your work—by carefully deconstructing the pictures—the time spent is not quality time. Shooting the pictures is one thing. Examining your performance is something else.

In the initial learning stages, which are probably the most frustrating, you learn that there are so many factors that affect the quality of your pictures that it can be quite frustrating. This may be the stage you're in now. The next stage—the creative stage—is the one where you really don't need much help anymore; your pictures start coming from an inner place that speaks to you in unique and aesthetic ways. People will then come to you for advice and counsel.

If you want to get there, you can, but it will take some patience and concerted effort. One of the best ways I know to hasten your growth is to be with your images more often. Shoot your images, download them onto your computer, and examine their effectiveness. After all my years of shooting, I know that no image is perfect. They can all be better, and I spend a lot of time looking at them to see what I've done and what I could have done better. This is a great exercise that will definitely improve your composition.

## EVERY PICTURE CAN BE BETTER

Every time I come back from a shoot or an assignment, I immediately download my images and begin to look at what worked compositionally. For instance, after a day on the golf course I wanted to carefully look at what I didn't do so well in order to see where I could have improved.

I was kicking myself with the image in **Figure 8.12** because it could have been so much better had I just moved a bit to the right and gotten a little higher. Moving to the right would have put the shadow on the tree trunk a little deeper into the frame and allowed the viewer to see a bit more of the golfer on the right just past the tree. Getting a little higher would have given the golfer addressing the ball more separation from the background by placing him more solidly against the clean, dark, green grass of the next fairway. These are two simple fixes that would have made a great deal of difference to the final image.

Looking at **Figure 8.13**, I realized that I had cut off the entry to the island. And, had I taken advantage of the fact that the foursome's golf cart was parked at the edge of the bridge, it would have added another dimension to the image as well. Choosing a slightly wider lens would have given the image a greater sense of isolation, too. Simple improvements would have made a noticeable difference in the final image.

**FIGURE 8.12**

Golfers play a round late in the afternoon at Desert Hot Springs Resort in California.



**FIGURE 8.13**

The Island Hole par three at Desert Hot Springs Resort is a favorite for many golfers who frequent the Palm Springs area.





## SIMPLE THINGS MAKE BIG DIFFERENCES

Each time you take the time to examine your shots, you refine your eye compositionally, and that process helps your growth. In the image of the basketball player (**Figure 8.14**), my conscious decision to place the player in the left third of the frame using the red color palette to the right as negative space worked, but making the silly mistake of cutting off the fingers of the player's left hand worked against the overall aesthetic value of the image. Just using a wider focal length lens would have corrected the problem and made for a better picture. In the image of the sprinter and her shadow on the track (**Figure 8.15**), the framing of the shot becomes a real distraction because of the upper-edge railing on the inside of the first lane, as well as the fact that I should have had the presence of mind to use a bit of a longer focal length to help me keep the hand of the shadow on the track in the frame.



ISO 400  
1/500 sec.  
f/2.8  
200mm lens

**FIGURE 8.14**  
A player in a local college tournament appears from behind a player in the foreground.

### FIGURE 8.15

A sprinter heads for the tape in a national track and field competition in Sacramento, California, late in the afternoon.



Learning to master composition means learning to become hyperfocused on the minute details within the viewfinder. It's making sure that you accurately see all those elements so that the construction of your pictures allows for the best possible images in any given situation. In sports, this process has to be faster and more accurate than in any other discipline of photography. To master it requires more practice and more attention on your part. Once you master the true art of managing sports compositions, everything else will seem like child's play; it will all seem like it's moving in slow motion.

# Chapter 8 Assignments

Be sure to complete the following assignments to help you become accustomed to speed and motion in your photography.

## Developing Visual Awareness

The idea in this exercise is to train yourself to see cleanly and compose pictures in a graphic context. A former editor of mine, whose voice still echoes in my head, used to preach endlessly at me. His mantra was this: “If you can’t be good, be graphic!” It sounds silly and simplistic, but the premise is golden. The clutter of our busy world can create a visual nightmare for pictures, so we have to train our eyes to see and shoot cleanly. Your assignment is to go to the local park where kids play pee-wee football. Bring your camera and the longest lens you can get your hands on. It would be best to have at least a 200mm lens with a fast aperture (f/2, f/2.8 etc.). Shoot only the action of the kids’ games using the fastest aperture available to you. Take the images home and review your shots. Look for the cleanest, tightest images you have, carefully examining the backgrounds in the photos. Were you able to shoot when the play was close and keep the images sharp? How well framed are the images? Do you notice that the tighter the images are, the cleaner the pictures look? Try to find at least five images that have well-framed subjects, diffused, pleasing backgrounds, and tight action. If you can’t find at least five images, repeat the assignment again until you can.

## Controlling Your Compositions

Go to a local tennis club and shoot the action of people playing. In this exercise, use only manual focus and a long lens (preferably a 300mm or better). Shoot peak action moments, but put the subject in the left third of the frame of the viewfinder. Make sure you have ten sharp images that are peak action oriented. Once you have ten images in the left third quadrant of the frame, shoot ten more, putting the subject in the right third quadrant of the frame. Again, it’s important to use manual focus. This exercise will help you develop the skill of conscious image placement and raise your awareness of the importance of compositional development.

## Shooting Traffic

See the first assignment at the beginning of the chapter in the section “One Simple Exercise.”

*Share your results with the book’s Flickr group!*

*Join the group here: [flickr.com/groups/composition\\_fromsnapshotstogreatshots](https://www.flickr.com/groups/composition_fromsnapshotstogreatshots)*

ISO 100  
1/1000 sec.  
f/4  
Lensbaby  
3G with 0.6X  
wide-angle  
conversion  
lens



# Beyond the Rule of Thirds

## A BRIEF HISTORY, SOME PSYCHOLOGY, AND POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SPACE

By David Brommer


I have a wonderful job. Aside from living a life of photography, I run a seminar program where I get to work with legendary photographers and also create photo programs. Lots of people show me their work, and I notice a recurring issue: They cut the scene in half. This is considered a cardinal sin in the world of photographic composition. And the more I look, the more base compositional problems I begin to notice. So I've done what any decent, self-respecting, photo guru would do—I created a program called, “Better Photographic Composition: Beyond the Rule of Thirds.”

In this chapter, I'll illustrate a few key points that are not often spoken of in the conversation of composition. The topics will include a history of composition (I firmly believe you have to know where you came from to move forward), deconstruction of a photograph, psychology, contextual considerations of said photograph, and using positive and negative space in the photograph.

# PORING OVER THE PICTURE

● The wires break up the pattern and give the left side weight.





The negative space is the  
sky above the buildings.

ISO 160  
1/90 sec.  
f/5.6  
21 MM 1.4  
Summilux-M

# PORING OVER THE PICTURE

The lines in the tiles are dynamic, like the word Imagine.



The shot is taken from a lower angle to accentuate the radiating lines.



● — Using a Lensbaby to shoot this well photographed New York landmark gives it a distinctive flavor.

● — The contrasting color palette of gray tiles against saturated flowers builds visual complexity.

The best part of working with an advanced camera like a DSLR is the control it provides over your image, allowing you to imagine limitless possibilities from lens selection to constructing perfect compositions.

ISO 200  
1/125 sec.  
f/4.0  
Lensbaby  
Control Freak

## WHERE DID COMPOSITION ORIGINATE?

Roughly 40,000 years ago, humans began to draw local fauna on cave walls. Most likely, this was done not for aesthetics but to create a record of what could be hunted in that region. This was practical art, which represented something quite significant. It explained an idea or concept beyond an elocution, in effect, telling a story with pictures instead of words. These petroglyphs would evolve into hieroglyphs where images and words intertwined to communicate various concepts about the afterlife. Throughout the later ages, painting would evolve, but realism would prove elusive.

We have very little record of painting at the start of the Common Era and leading up to the Middle Ages because it was a dark time of strife. Rome, the cultural capital of the world, had fallen to ruins, her art destroyed or lost. The paintings executed thereafter were mostly in the “Iconic” style of the Byzantine Empire. They were flat, used a narrow color palette, and were limited in scope and grandeur. However, the early Renaissance brought about much change, which can be attributed to one man, an Italian Florentine named Giotto di Bondone.

Giotto (1267–1337) was able to resurrect a quality of painting that had remained dormant since the onset of the Dark Ages. He was keen on reproducing nature in his paintings. His work included the use of perspective, a wide palette of colors, and most important, expressions on the faces of his subjects. Figures came alive and elements of design were incorporated—both practices that profoundly impacted art.

The lessons in this book are a direct result of Giotto’s influence on aesthetics. Although Giotto painted in fresco and tempera during the early Renaissance, later the great artists of the middle and high Renaissance would study his works in churches throughout Italy. His use of perspective and realism would be key to our foundations of composition.

After Giotto, Leonardo da Vinci would paint his Last Supper, and all the lines in the painting converged on the right eye of the centrally placed Christ, in a harmony of figures and space unseen (and unpainted) before. Leonardo used draftsmanship and mathematics to achieve a complicated composition. Michelangelo would paint with such emotion and complicated compositions that it would seem he had a divine right to the brush and colors. It took five years for Michelangelo to complete the Sistine Chapel, and when he finished, he had created a massive storyboard under one roof telling nine stories from the Book of Genesis. Sandro Botticelli would be unafraid to use bold colors and elaborate compositions to illustrate both Christian and pagan themes. Caravaggio showed an appreciation for light and shadow. His ability to

represent these elements in paint heavily influenced the Dutch and Flemish painters. The Western world would use these practices as a blueprint and foundation for artwork “rules” that would prevail until the present.

## THE HOCKNEY-FALCO THEORY

Advancing painting techniques of the old masters started a trend. Hyperrealism and accuracy started showing up in works as early as the mid-1400s on. Jan Vermeer (1632–1675), a Dutch painter, completed works that offered amazingly detailed perspectives of cityscapes—almost so perfect that they were “photographic” in their imitation of reality. Contemporary artist David Hockney and physicist Charles Falco proposed a theory that camera obscura and other optical devices were used to aid the painter in rendering a scene. In the case of Vermeer’s “View of Delft” (1660–1661) (**Figure 9.1**), we see a perfect painting depicting his hometown of Delft taken across a river. Imagine that Vermeer walked about viewing his scene the same way photographers survey the best vantage point to shoot. Once the ideal location was found, Vermeer set up a tent of opaque material, used either a pinhole or a primitive piece of optics, placed his canvas opposite the aperture or lens, and traced the inverted “camera obscura” image as reference. He then took the canvas back to his studio and completed the painting.



**FIGURE 9.1**  
“View of Delft,”  
by Jan Vermeer.

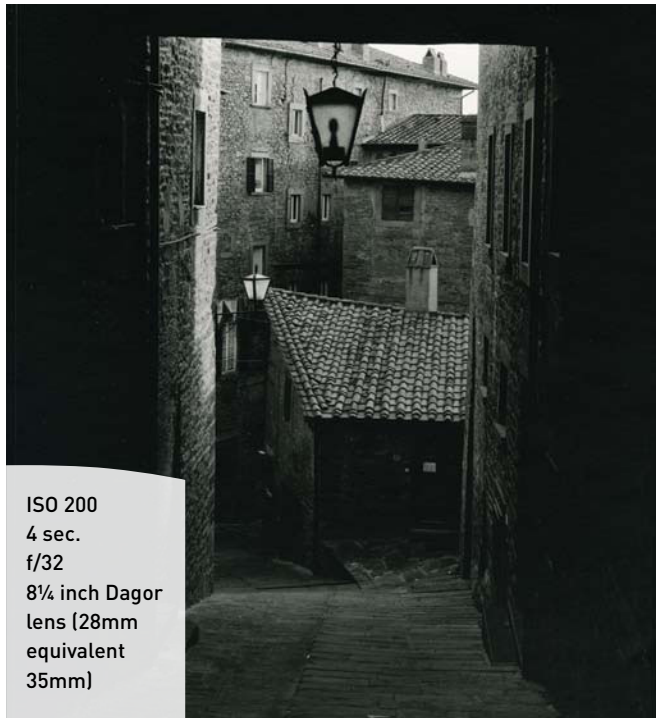
Although the Hockney-Falco theory is very romantic to photographers, it is not without its detractors. In argument, and simply put, the old masters were that good. Never mind that Vermeer didn't make extensive preliminary perspective studies as precursors to his final paintings, or that certain specular highlights were painted by Jan Van Eyck, suggesting that convex mirrors were being used. The truth about what went on is lost in antiquity, but remains a bridge to the true invention of photography—where the image can be permanently fixed upon a material and subsequently duplicated.

## GOOD COMPOSITION IS IN OUR DNA!

A good compositional sense is hardwired into each of us. When composition works, it allows our minds to perceive an image with harmony, and we begin to like or dislike an image and subsequently have an emotional reaction (**Figure 9.2**). In nature, there are repeating aspects of perfection, such as in the spiral. The spiral can be manifested in the shell of a snail or the twist of our DNA. The spiral is, like the number three and our rule of thirds, an aspect deeply rooted in our psychology of imagery. When seeking out a great composition, keep your eyes open for spirals or circles (**Figure 9.3**). They can help you create wonderful compositions.

For many years I took it for granted that the old masters created the rules, but they didn't. Good old Giotto simply reestablished what was in our human heritage. Thus far I have spoken about Western considerations as they relate to art, but what about Eastern art? As image makers we know that the finesse of Japanese photographers certainly deserves admiration. I had the opportunity to view firsthand paintings by the Japanese painter Hiroshige (1797–1858), who worked in a style known as Ukiyo-e, a woodblock painting technique very common in Japan from the seventeenth through the twentieth century. Hiroshige was quite famous and prolific, and considered a master of this technique. Aside from the sheer beauty of his work, what stunned me were the compositional similarities to Western masters. Granted that sweeping waves, a traditional Japanese color palette, and images of Mount Fuji weren't to be found in the paintings produced in Florence during the mid-1500s, but Hiroshige adhered to compositional rules that were completely in line with Western masters. He never cut his horizon in two, he embraced the rule of thirds, and he used leading lines, as well as positive and negative space. Hiroshige lived in Edo, which is now Tokyo, and was most likely not exposed to Giotto or what was going on art-wise on the other side of the world. During his lifetime Japan, the holy empire of the east, was sealed off from the world due to political conditions and xenophobia. He never traveled off the island of Japan, and the odds of his being exposed to Western art





**FIGURE 9.2**

The lines formed by the roof gutters lead the viewer to the center of the composition, not off to the right side. A small aperture gave me maximum depth of field, so everything in the image is sharp. Black and white is a good choice when shooting a medieval city such as Cortona.



**FIGURE 9.3**

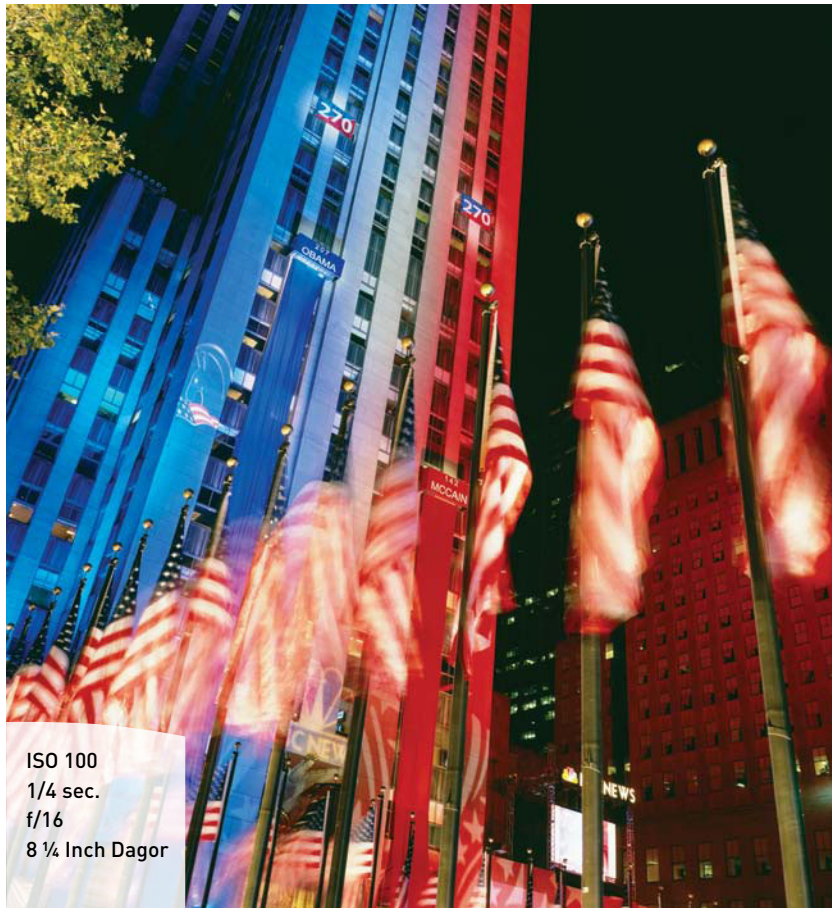
Try to incorporate a spiral element in your image. This arcade is the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan.

culture were next to nil. From this I extrapolate that the rules of composition reside in our DNA. Humans comprise multiple races and nationalities, and no matter our color or creed, it seems that composition is inherent, like the spiral found inside a strand of DNA.

One thing that the painters had going for them was time. They were able to craft their paintings and build up perfection in their compositions. As photographers, we do not have that luxury; we must carefully find a correct vantage to lend the image its point of view. Paying close attention first to the corners is essential and can help you find just the right place to set up the camera (**Figure 9.4**). After establishing the subject, you must consider the corners of the image. This is when you notice that tree branch in the background cutting into your subject's head or that the left corner that is six stops brighter than anything else and will be distracting. Take your time and reflect on the entire frame so as to not make a compositional error that will make the image render poorly.

#### FIGURE 9.4

Elements in the foreground help define the complexity of the subject matter. Here the flags illustrate the political context of Election Night 2007.



Artists, be they painters or photographers, often work in a two-dimensional medium. We create flat artwork of a three-dimensional world. Even photographers who create 3-D work by utilizing stereoscopic techniques are still essentially making flat artwork. We have tools such as depth of field, perspective, and compression to capture reality in a photograph (**Figure 9.5**), and we do so with sometimes astonishing technical acumen. But what makes one photograph stand out from another? With the advent of digital photography and large-capacity memory cards, a tremendous volume of photographs are currently being captured. This poses some questions: What are we accomplishing with all this work being created? Do we make good, bad, or great photographs? And what constitutes “good” or “bad”?



ISO 800  
1/100 sec.  
f/14  
95mm Fuji  
Instax Instant  
photograph

**FIGURE 9.5**

A reflecting pool can add dimension to your composition. Here I adjusted the camera so the reflection complemented the original, the Castello Sforza in Milan.



## DECONSTRUCTION AND PSYCHOLOGY OF A COMPOSITION

Our photographs are frequently classified as landscapes, portraits, wild life, still life, street shooting, fashion—the list goes on. I'm sure you are familiar with the type of photography you mostly engage in. However, let us break this down much further and deconstruct our image to its core. No matter the subject or the light it is photographed in, we seek a reaction to our image from our viewers. Garnering an emotional response is essential to the composition, or I should state, the psychological composition. Take for example a photograph of a lion: If the lion is sleeping, the reaction will be less enthusiastic than, say, if the lion were in mid-roar. The roaring lion will spark either fear or awe. *Playboy* magazine centerfolds seek to elicit lust; landscapes and street shooting seek to capture the spirit of a place; and a portrait of a bride seeks to impart her excitement about that special day. What are your subjects saying? A photograph either has a voice (**Figure 9.6**) or is silent. Silent photographs are the ones that are frequently edited out or are deleted.

**FIGURE 9.6**

I wanted the viewer to feel as though they were in the parade and sense the pride that the flag bearer has walking with his brothers in the Sikh Day Parade.



## STUDIUM AND PUNCTUM

To better understand a photograph, I'll borrow a lesson from Roland Barthe's seminal photography essay book, *Camera Lucida*. Barthe speaks about an image causing a reaction and attraction, and he classifies these responses in two categories, studium and punctum. Studium is Latin for a general "liking" or intellectual commitment to the image. To expand on Barthe's definitions, I'd like to add that images containing studium have compositional harmony that conveys the idea and allows a viewer to acknowledge the photograph at face value. The viewer's reaction is not a like or dislike but that a "notice" has occurred and some type of psychological judgment made. Studium at best is when the picture simply works but isn't going to win any contests (**Figure 9.7**). Not to diminish images that elicit studium, on the contrary, many stock images of travel and lifestyle, portraits, sports, street scenes, landscapes, and wild life fall into this category.



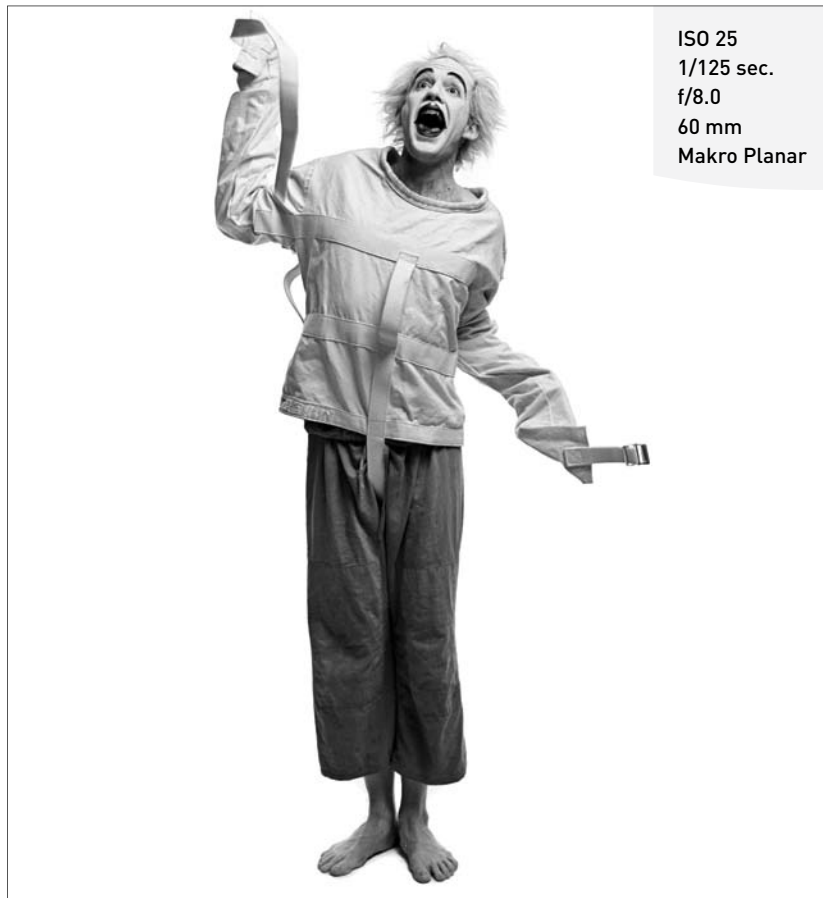
**FIGURE 9.7**  
A simple  
composition of  
the Citroen 2CV.

Punctum, on the other hand, is a quality that transcends studium. An image with punctum penetrates the viewer's consciousness. If studium is talking, then punctum is a scream. Punctum is the most elusive to capture. Sometimes punctum occurs by accident; at other times you have to integrate elements and really think about your photograph to induce punctum. Eddie Adams's famous photograph of the Vietnamese general executing the North Vietnamese sniper contains punctum, but certainly not every frame Eddie captured in his tour of Vietnam was able to live up to that photograph. Punctum is the photographic Holy Grail; images that contain it win awards, sell on gallery walls, and are chosen to be magazine covers.

I present to you Fire Ball Bill (**Figure 9.8**), a contortionist and fire-breathing performance artist who is the perfect subject for an image with a bang. Shooting sequentially, I was able to capture Fire Ball Bill escaping from the confines of a straight jacket. His crazy clown makeup, his body language, and his bare feet all combine to make an image with a little shock and awe.

### FIGURE 9.8

For this image, shooting in continuous drive mode with flash presented problems with the strobes keeping up with the camera. I used less flash power and moved the strobes closer to compensate. Less flash output allows the strobes to recharge quicker.





## HUMOR

Now that we are deep into emotional reactions to images, we have many options to stimulate an emotional response. Let's consider *humor*, which can be exploited to make a viewer chuckle and enjoy the image. Seek the punctum in your images, but don't overlook the studium. Studium is the concert performance leading up to the encore set. Poorly composed and ill-executed photographs will not get you paid nor make anyone admire your photography. Practice the lessons in this book and create a large body of work that qualifies as studium, and when an opportunity for punctum presents itself, you will be ready to capture one of those elusive photographs that becomes one of your *signature images*.

I like to call the image in **Figure 9.9** "double punctum." While walking through a large square I spotted the two beagles with their tails up and quickly ran up behind them to snap the shot with a Fuji Instax camera. Most dog lovers laugh when they see this image; it's fun and whimsical.



**FIGURE 9.9**

Candid street shooting gives you less time to prepare the shot. Make sure your exposure and focus modes are preset so you don't miss the shot adjusting your camera.

## POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SPACE

No matter whether you're an optimist or a pessimist, or whether you find that the viewfinder frame tends to be half full or half empty, incorporating positive and negative space is fundamental to good composition. Permit me to emphasize this element because it is critical to composition. Positive space is the part of the frame that is filled with something, such as lines, subjects, color, or shapes. The positive is surrounded by negative space, which is empty or void space, space around an object or form (**Figure 9.10**). Think of positive and negative space like yin and yang; the two are harmonious. The eye follows the negative space and is driven into the positive space like a highway drives into a city.

**FIGURE 9.10**

To capture the child's playful energy, I chose a lower shutter speed and panned the camera.

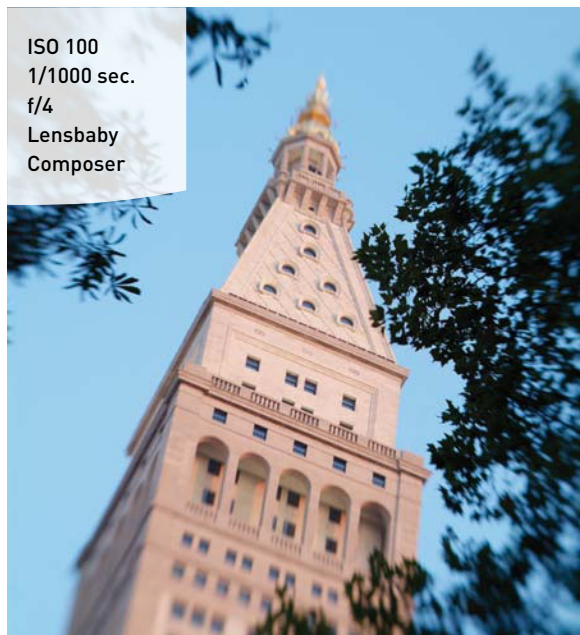
ISO 100  
1/60 sec.  
f/4  
Lensbaby  
3G with 0.6X  
wide-angle  
conversion  
lens



Positive space does not hold the subject in it, it is the subject. As an eye traverses the image, it will stop on the aspects of positive space and contemplate. The viewer's mind will recognize and draw conclusions about what it perceives in this area of the composition and decide if it has studium enough to merit further attention. Negative space surrounding the positive is akin to a backdrop for the subject. Often, it will be a contrast or an opposite of the positive space. It is best when the negative space makes intrusions into the positive space. I like to call these intrusions "rivers" of negative space, and much like rivers across a landscape, they force the viewers' eyes to meander about the image, soaking up the details in different parts of the photograph.

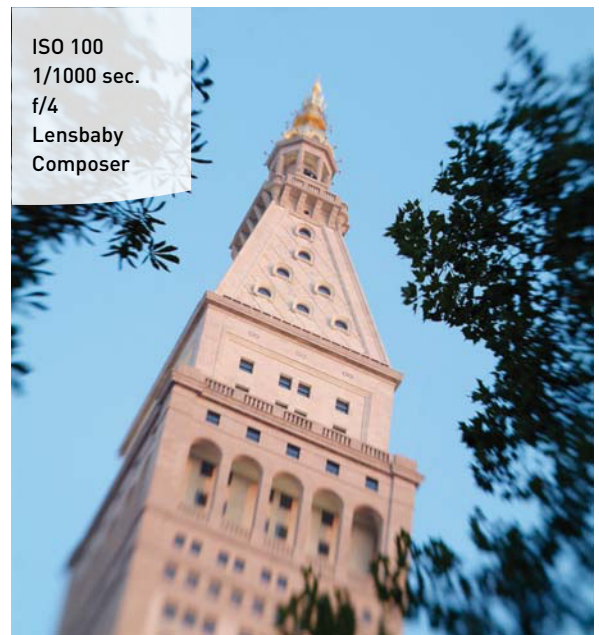
Using negative space to surround a subject is always a good idea.

Take a look at **Figures 9.11** and **9.12**. At first they appear identical, but one has a compositional defect. After composing and taking the picture, I "chimped" (photographer slang for reviewing the image on the camera's LCD screen) and noticed I had ever so slightly broken up the negative space by touching leaves to the building. A strategic two steps to the left, and the next shot kept the building floating in the blue sky without interruption.



**FIGURE 9.11**

Keep an eye out for objects to frame your subject and occupy the foreground.



**FIGURE 9.12**

Reposition your camera to maximize the interaction of negative and positive space.

The foreground is another aspect to keep in mind. How does foreground play into the positive and negative space? Foreground can be considered positive space if it has details; foreground can also be considered negative space if it supports the main subject in a simplified graphic way (**Figure 9.13**). Integrating foreground is actually very important, because it can inform the viewer of scale, help establish the location of the shot, and also provide another element to work within the composition. Incorporating an element of foreground will also help build up the complexity of your image.

### FIGURE 9.13

The original image was captured in color, but I found that a black and white treatment during postprocessing added to the mystery of the garden.



## BALANCE OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SPACE

Harmony is achievable when the image has a fairly equal measure of positive space and negative space. Negative space is not always a sky or open background (**Figure 9.14**). Negative space can also be a texture or a repeating pattern, like a dense forest of pines, an ocean vista, or a wall of peeling paint. If the image has a limited color palette, and the negative space is the opposite of those colors, it can be more dramatic, like a slice of blue sky in a city scene of tan buildings. Think about looking up Fifth Avenue in New York City on a rainy day at 5 P.M. You will see a sea of black umbrellas, but the one red umbrella is what you really notice. Even though there may be 20 black umbrellas to the one red one, the red one is the one your eye will follow.



ISO 200  
1/750 sec.  
f/4  
Lensbaby  
3G with 0.6X  
wide-angle  
conversion  
lens



**FIGURE 9.14**  
To capture this busy image, I shot low to the ground using the pavement to frame the boxes of balls and create negative space.

You should be very conscious of positive and negative space, and try to lead the negative space into or surrounding the positive space whenever possible. Sometimes you will have to move to get the right angle, or you may have to adjust objects in the image to create a nice harmony of positive and negative space (**Figure 9.15**). When I shoot in the studio, I have no problem moving things around until they “fit” just right into the composition.

### FIGURE 9.15

Here I positioned the roll of paper towels with a wire coat hanger to create positive and negative space. I turned the bucket so the handle stuck out in negative space.



ISO 25  
1/125 sec.  
f/8  
60 mm  
Makro Planar



## POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SPACE IN PORTRAITS

My true passion in photography is portraits. I like a photograph to say something, and allowing a person to speak for me makes the most satisfying image. Years ago at a museum, I watched a video of a Helmut Newton interview, which made a lasting impression on me. It really married positive and negative space in the portrait as a method for my future compositions. He said he would ask his models to face him and give him a “western gunslinger” pose, which is characterized by arms dangling down a few inches from the sides of the torso, thumbs extended, and palms facing the hips. Aside from expressing an attitude, this pose allows the background to creep up the arms, terminating at the shoulder. It is a dynamic pose, which conveys energy and action. The eyes follow the arms and explore the body language. It’s interesting to use the term body language, because if we are trying to have the image speak, visual linguistics are surely at play (**Figure 9.16**).



**FIGURE 9.16**

In this shot, I dodged the circle in the subject's shirt to make it brighter, forming negative space in a positive space.

If you don't have the luxury of a studio, there are other creative backgrounds you can utilize by limiting the depth of field and working with a portrait or telephoto lens. Shoot wide open, and focus on the eye of the subject (**Figure 9.17**). It is very important that you lock focus on the eyes. If the subject is skewed to you, focus on the eye closest to your lens. If the subject is facing straight at you, make sure you don't accidentally focus on the nose. Feel free to move up and shoot down so as to hide the horizon (by shooting higher than the subject, you will lose the horizon above the subject's head). Or place the subject at least five feet from a wall. Try to avoid having subjects right up against the wall so that depth of field can do its job and soften the wall, thus accentuating the subject.

### FIGURE 9.17

The background of this shot is gray pavement, but using depth of field it appears as a seamless studio backdrop.



Sometimes negative space can be very complicated to integrate. A trick used in **Figure 9.18** was to turn some of the subjects and cluttered background slightly out of focus using a shallower depth of field. The foreground with the interesting colored vegetables remains sharp, but the farther back the scene goes, the less is in focus.



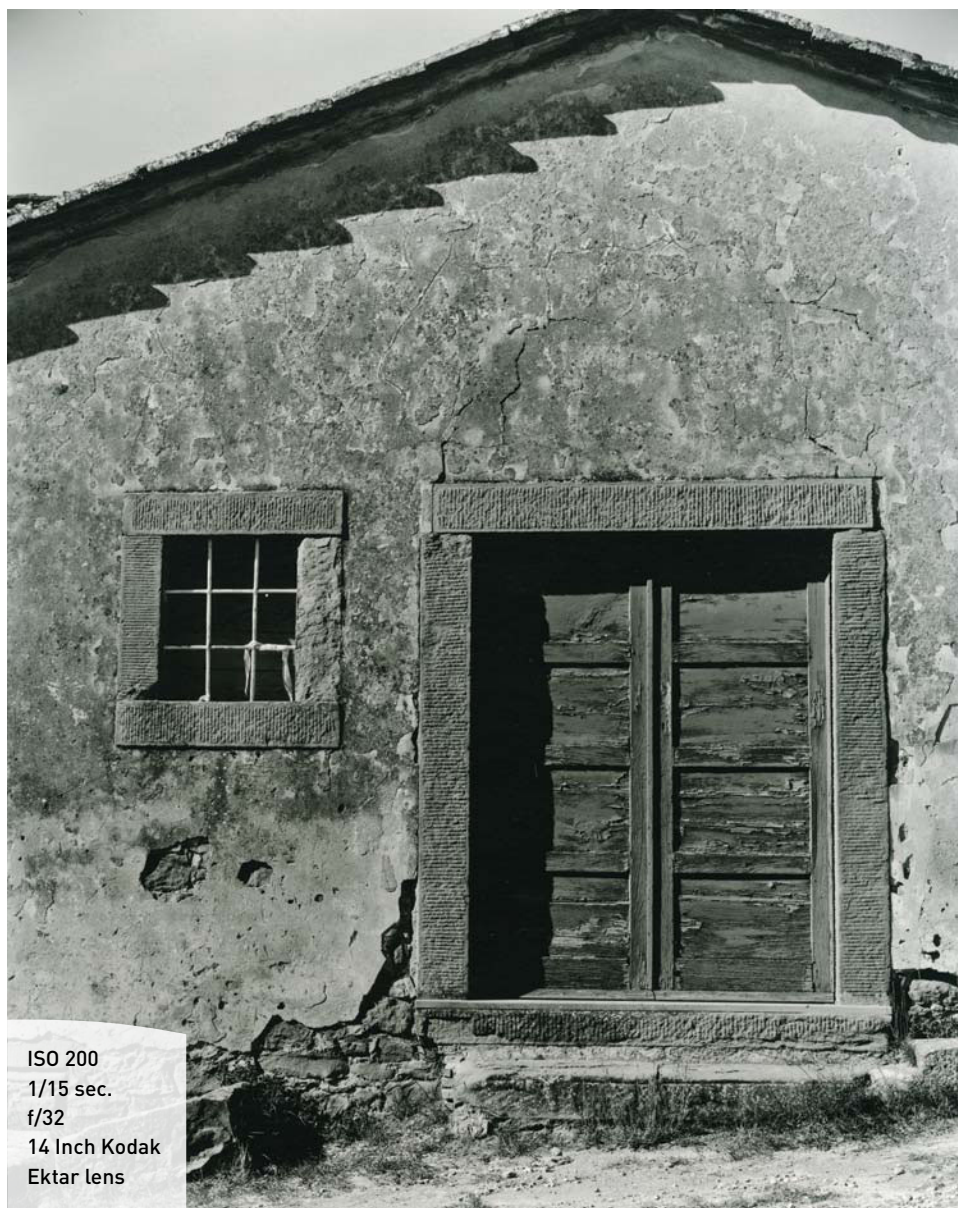
**FIGURE 9.18**  
In this image of colorful produce, the figures have complementary gestures. Each figure has what the other is lacking (heads or hands).

## THOUGHTS ON CROPPING AND PRINTING

When we go to print and have decided on using an established size, such as 8x10, 11x14, or 16x20, there will be a significant crop to most captured images. The great Ansel Adams was a proponent of previsualization when he made his photographs. Before he took the photograph, he would crop the image in the viewfinder the way he wanted the final print to look (**Figure 9.19**). I like to use all the space that I have on my sensor/film to capture the image, and sometimes the crop factor will negate my careful composition. That's why when I go to print, I choose a larger size paper than the size of my final image. I will fit the image on the paper without a crop and gain a wider border. I never print borderless because I'm afraid I'll lose a part of the composition, usually in the delicate negative space. Often with a modern, pigment-based inkjet printer, I will print on 13x19 paper, but the image may end up being 11x17 or slightly smaller. You can always trim the excess border, but when you use high-quality papers, that clean, white border containing your image can often be very pleasing.

### FIGURE 9.19

I was drawn to the corners of this photograph. The top was clean sky and the bottom was rough brick. The texture of the building's surface is visually irresistible.



ISO 200  
1/15 sec.  
f/32  
14 Inch Kodak  
Ektar lens

# Chapter 9 Assignments

After completing the following assignments, you should have a better understanding of what reactions your images elicit and how to work with positive and negative space.

## Look at More Photo Books

For this assignment, you won't need your camera or lenses. Simply go to a good bookstore and spend some time perusing the photography books. You will notice that there will be a selection of the masters, as well as quite a few books by photographers you may not have heard of. I suggest you pick up a book by a photographer who has a similar style to your own and study those images. Just looking at more images will affect your photographic eye as much as creating images.

## Play "Stock Photographer"

Go to a market, mall, or amusement park and make images that reflect studium. Capture a sense of place, but use this mantra, "I will spend more time making fewer pictures." In other words, spend a good amount of time shooting, say, the roller coaster. Capture the essence by making abstract photos of the girders and supports, take a few portraits of the operators, and most of all, step behind the roller coaster where there aren't any people and capture a side that few see.

## Photograph Your Day

Load your camera with fresh film or a memory card and a charged battery, and leave it on your nightstand before you go to bed on a night before a workday. When you wake up, start shooting the light coming in your window. Keep the camera with you all day and document your day. That means photograph your breakfast, lunch, and dinner; photograph your commute; and photograph your co-workers. It is an interesting exercise and one that you will learn a lot from. You'll also come back with some great shots of just a regular day.

*Share your results with the book's Flickr group!*

*Join the group here: [flickr.com/groups/composition\\_fromsnapshotstogreatshots](https://www.flickr.com/groups/composition_fromsnapshotstogreatshots)*

ISO 100  
1/1000 sec.  
f/5.6  
17-55mm lens





# The Compositional Dance

By Steve Simon

*I work from awkwardness. By that I mean I don't like to arrange things.  
If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself.*

—Diane Arbus

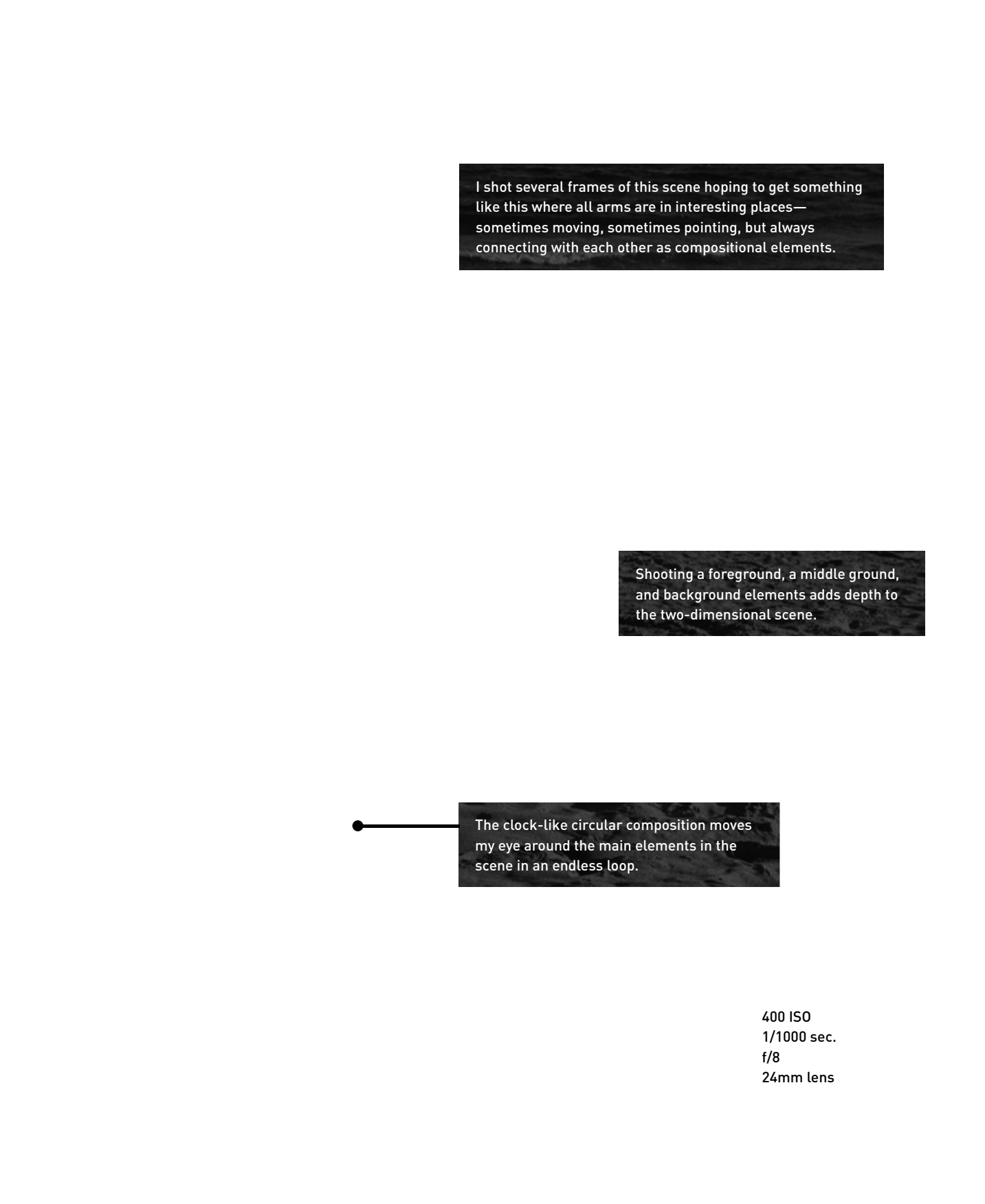
The sheer act of determining what is placed within the frame and what is left out—the organization of space—is one of the most important tasks we do when taking pictures. Composition is a bit like a dance: You move around the floor and try new angles to see what they look like so you can arrive at the best possible place to take the picture.

The more you work the scene, often the better the photographs become. Here are some strategies for finding your way to the best composition for any given shooting situation.

## PORING OVER THE PICTURE

I was walking along the beach at Coney Island when I noticed this scene. The two guys lying in the foreground caught my eye. Everyone was resting, and no one seemed to notice me. So I got to work waiting, then shooting the scene, and then waiting for the boat to near the center of the frame at the horizon. Luckily, the arms of the man exercising seem to push your eye to the child running. In fact, all the arms of the individuals within the frame seem to work visually in concert as your eye roams around the scene. I took several shots, but this was my favorite.

The main subjects are all sitting in off-center areas of the frame for added emphasis.



I shot several frames of this scene hoping to get something like this where all arms are in interesting places—sometimes moving, sometimes pointing, but always connecting with each other as compositional elements.

Shooting a foreground, a middle ground, and background elements adds depth to the two-dimensional scene.

● — The clock-like circular composition moves my eye around the main elements in the scene in an endless loop.

400 ISO  
1/1000 sec.  
f/8  
24mm lens

## PORING OVER THE PICTURE

ISO 200  
1/200 sec.  
f/4.5  
17-55mm lens



## THE DANCE

The compositional dance is a game of inches. Look through the viewfinder to see how a slight movement can dramatically impact your final composition. This is important to know, because a slight movement can transform a good photograph into a great one.

It's not just you, the photographer, moving and changing the composition. In a world that never stops, a slight gesture can have a dramatic effect on the final photograph. Bend your knees, change the perspective, and change the juxtaposition of foreground subjects with the horizon (**Figures 10.1–10.4**).

### FIGURES 10.1 AND 10.2

This image uses the horizon line to cut the image in half, something that is not often recommended, but the picture still works. There are no rules, only guides. A composition is successful when it works. Straightening the horizon, however, did help.





But the art of composition is not a science. Photography is personal. It takes a long time for photographers to learn to trust their intuition, especially when the creative process can feel so technical when using a camera. Your left brain is busy worrying about the camera settings like white balance, f-stops, and shutter speeds, and all your right brain wants to do is take pictures.

The guidelines for good composition are there for good reason: They often work. But for new photographers, they sometimes add to the left-brain dilemma with more dos and don'ts that can get in the way of seeing and feeling your compositions.



### FIGURES 10.3 AND 10.4

Bend your knees and see how the subject changes position relative to other elements within the frame. I often go down low, to place a subject above the horizon line for a more dramatic and effective composition.



Therefore, it is important to learn and understand the rules and guides of composing through the viewfinder while determining how to put them to work for you. However, learning when to ignore them is key to your evolution as a photographer.

Before your left brain can be freed from the chains of technical constraint and before technique fades to the unconscious and becomes second nature as you explore your subjects with abandon in a beautiful dance of color, tones, and light—you have to pay your dues. That is, put in the time learning all you can from this book, and most important, through personal experience. When you do this and you persevere, I guarantee you will get to a place of photographic competence and satisfaction you can't even imagine right now.

Before I go further, it's worth mentioning that I've never been one to break down the component parts of an image, spill them on the floor, and scientifically analyze them. There is mystery and magic to the creative process that can't be articulated. Sometimes an image can adhere to all the rules and guides, and end up being perfectly boring.

The photographic process at its highest level is akin to a musician arranging notes that provoke emotions or a designer stimulating your senses. Personally, if I had to articulate what I do as I dance around the composition, I would say I'm trying to compose my pictures by arranging visual elements for maximum impact and communication.

We don't always do it on a conscious level, but with experience we learn to constantly scan the viewfinder, looking at the placement of lines and form, the balance of objects, the relationship with foreground and background elements, and the scale between them.

## WORK THE SCENE

Once your photograph is found, working the composition can be a very subtractive process as you eliminate clutter, cleaning up and organizing image elements to focus attention on what you deem important. Scan the edges of the frame to make sure you're not missing anything, and look for details that can be improved by cropping or inclusion within the frame (**Figures 10.5–10.10**).

Sometimes there is an energy and movement created with a good composition where the lines and curves of image elements keep the viewer's eye inside the frame. Then there's the content itself and what it might mean to—or how it will be interpreted by—the viewer.



ISO 200  
1/200–1/640 sec.  
f/4  
35–60mm lens  
and 24–70mm  
zoom

### FIGURES 10.5–10.10

Working the scene. The first shot shown here was my starting point, but as Suzane Nyirabukara walked away from me toward her home in Kigali, Rwanda, I thought it was a more interesting shot from behind. I followed her, shooting and cleaning up the frame as I went.



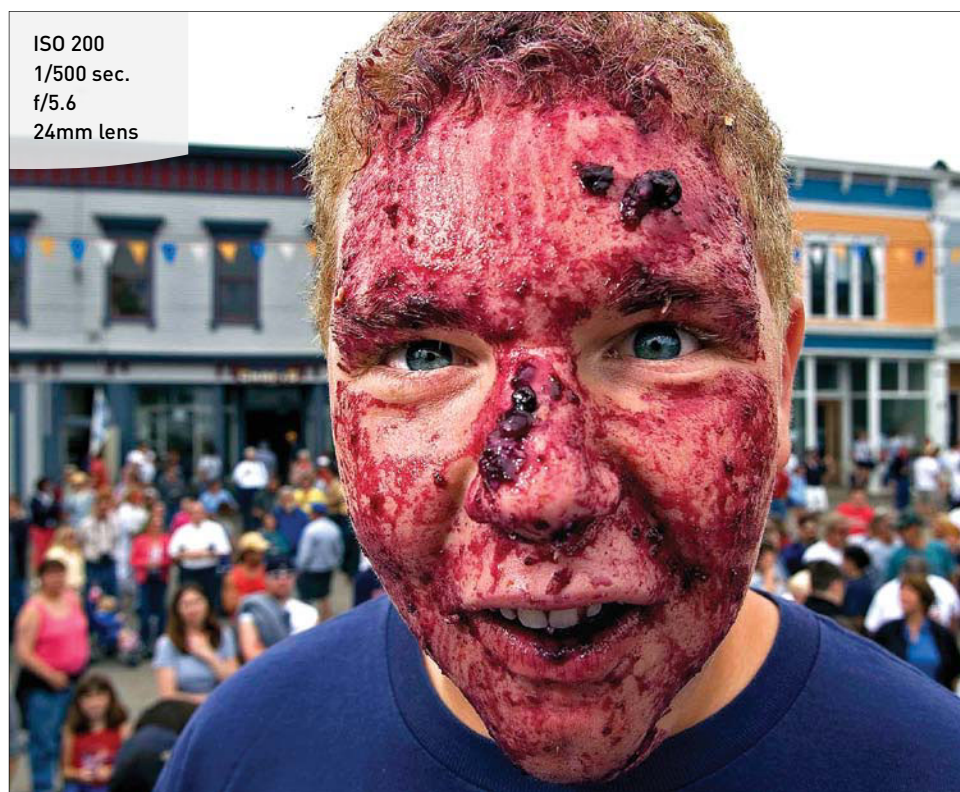
## CHANGE YOUR VANTAGE POINT

As we wander through life, we see the world from perhaps our most common vantage point: standing up, eye-level, a distance from our subject that can be described as our comfort zone—not too close, not too far away. In the compositional dance, this is just the starting point for photography.

Filling the frame is often a good idea and can help define the focal point of your image or the point of interest that makes your photograph unique (**Figure 10.11**). My photographer friend Bill Durrence has a mantra that I also share because it helps many photographers find focus. Take the picture, and then move three steps closer. Take another, and then move three steps closer. Repeat. We need to shake ourselves out of our comfort zone (**Figures 10.12–10.14**).

**FIGURE 10.11**

Filling the frame by getting in close can add impact to your final composition. Mmmm, blueberry pie.





ISO 400  
1/125–1/250 sec.  
f/2.8  
35–70mm lens



### FIGURES 10.12–10.14

By moving in three steps closer and then three steps closer, I ended up with a much more powerful image than the one I started with.

Show viewers of your work a new view of a common scene. Explore different points of view by getting down low, up high, in close, or in some other unexpected camera position. This is where the dance should take you.

*National Geographic* photographer Sam Abell spoke about how the photographic process is often a form of chaos with much that is out of your control. What you can control is the composition. Once selected, if life is moving about within the frame, with luck and timing all the forces combine to produce a great photograph.

## BE IN THE MOMENT

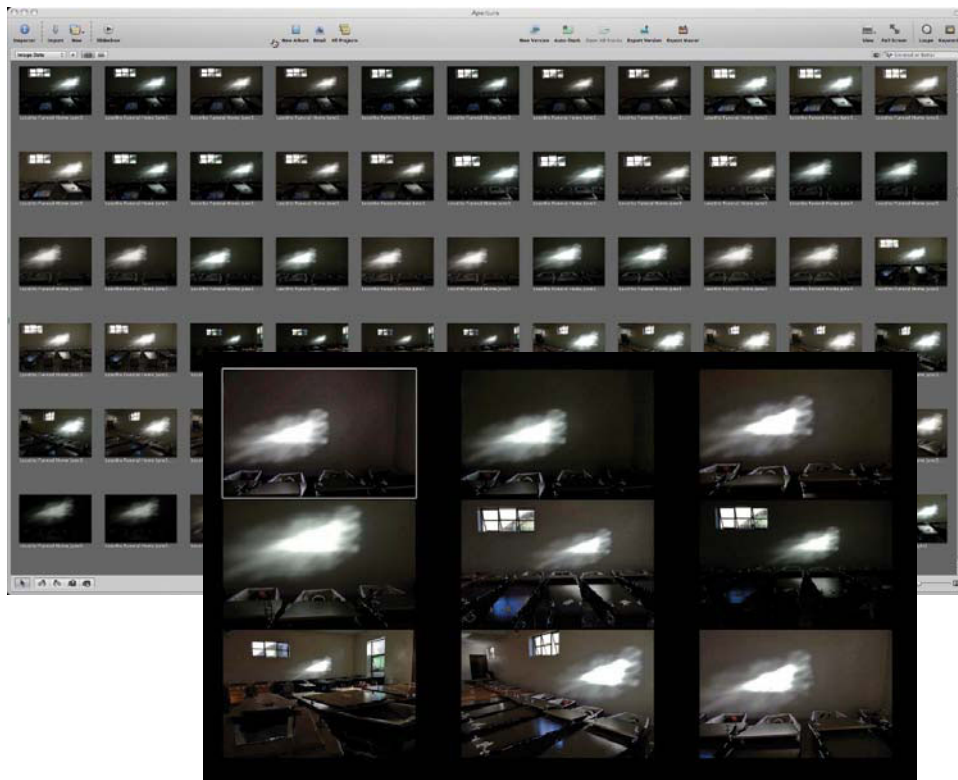
My best shooting experiences meld the physical—the act of shooting—with the mental and emotional (which becomes second nature with experience) to get to a place where I’m in a zone of concentration, where I’m in the moment. To be in the moment, I save my final editing decisions for when I’m home on my computer and don’t look much at my image-review screen except to check exposure and focus (**Figures 10.15–10.17**). I find if I look at images of what I just shot, it takes me away from the dance and out of the moment, interrupting my concentration.

It helps me when I discipline myself to maintain my concentration. Sometimes photographers need a hand, but I much prefer to shoot alone. In my experience, my best shooting comes from a lone-wolf style, with just me or just me and my subject(s), which limits distractions.

We’re constantly working in a kind of shorthand: Our eyes are open, but we may not see. If you’ve ever driven a car while deep in thought or perhaps while talking on your speakerphone, you understand auto-pilot mode. During this time, you often have little or no recollection of what you saw as you were driving—a bit scary, actually. We can function at both tasks because we look with our eyes, but we see with our brains. We’re not really concentrating on what our eyes are showing us. We look at the road, the lights, and the other cars enough to safely get to where we need to go, but we’re not seeing the way a photographer needs to see to do good work.

With our cameras we need to look, recognize, and see an almost infinite number of variables that can be included or excluded in the frame of our photograph.





## FIGURES 10.15–10.17

By being in the moment and concentrating while moving around to determine the composition, you can create numerous options and arrive at the strongest image at the end of the process.



ISO 400  
1/500 sec.  
f/5.6  
17–55mm lens

To get to that place, I can't just turn it on like the switch on my digital camera. I need to warm up. Athletes warm up. Musicians do, too. So why not photographers? For me, warming up means picking up my camera and shooting as soon as possible—shooting something, anything, as an icebreaker—not waiting for that perfect picture but working up to it by limbering up my photographic muscles physically and mentally.

Putting in years as a newspaper photographer, I often had to go out and find pictures. Inspired or not, it was my job. Those times when I waited for something better—instead of stopping and exploring a lesser photo opportunity and really working it—would often lead to regret, because the opportunities passed were better than the ones I ended up seeing.

## CHOICES AND LIMITATIONS

The compositional dance is about figuring out a way to compose the image within the viewfinder by moving yourself, which moves the smallest of details for maximum visual impact. You can make use of all photographic techniques to create the atmosphere or emotion you are feeling and want to transmit.

We have some control by choosing how we work. Different lenses, from wide-angle to telephoto, can change and alter shapes and relationships between foreground and background objects. Longer lenses give flatter, more compressed perspectives, whereas wide-angle lenses communicate intimate perspectives, which “read” in the final image (**Figure 10.18**).

So many of us use zooms these days, and for new photographers, I feel they present too many choices that add to the overwhelming number of decisions we already have to make. I suggest using fixed focal lenses when you hit the compositional dance floor, or shooting with zoom lenses racked to either extreme and moving yourself as Diane Arbus did. With experience, you will know when to finesse your compositions with slight adjustments of the zoom's focal length.

In the meantime, there are several other choices to make. Deciding which camera angle, shutter speed, aperture, distance, light, and moment the picture is taken can all have a profound effect on what will be emphasized and communicated in the final composition. Choosing selective focus or maximum depth of field, blurring through slow exposures or stopping the motion entirely, as well as determining sharpness and clarity can each tell a different story. We decide what story to tell.



**FIGURE 10.18**

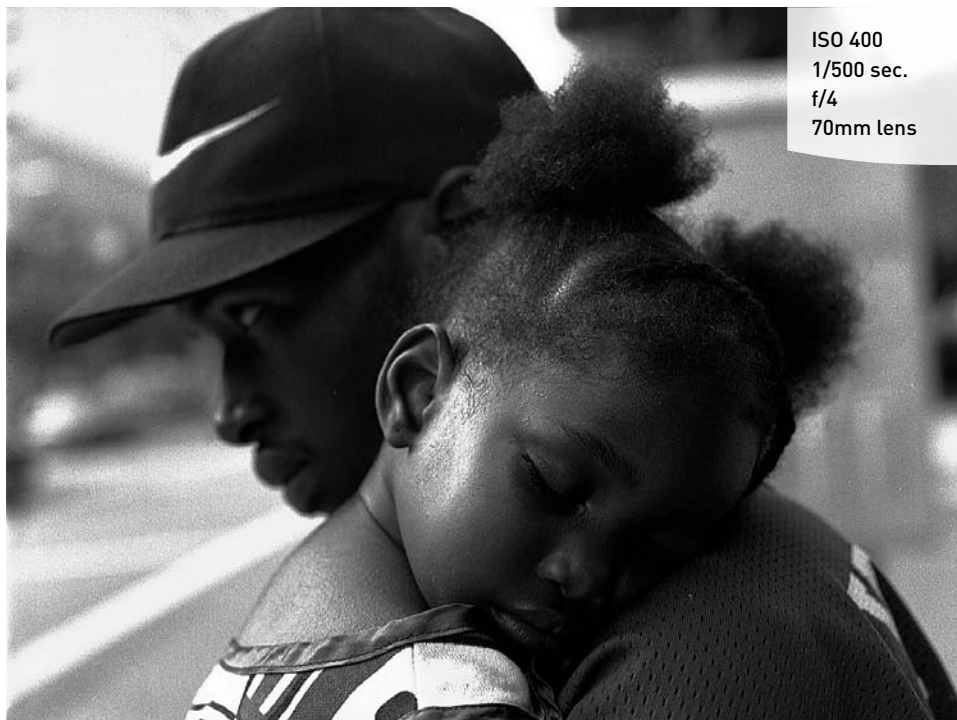
There was a moment between me and my subject here that translates well to the viewer. Taken with a wide-angle lens in close proximity, there is intimacy and you can feel the tension—with the man on the left adding to the immediacy of the moment.

By working through a number of these technical scenarios, you can later determine what resembles your vision of the scene best. Give yourself options. Try them all and learn. Working the scene makes editing more difficult, and that's a good thing. It forces you to choose between many strong images with subtle degrees of difference (**Figures 10.19 and 10.20**). With experience, you will have a clearer idea of which technical approaches to employ.

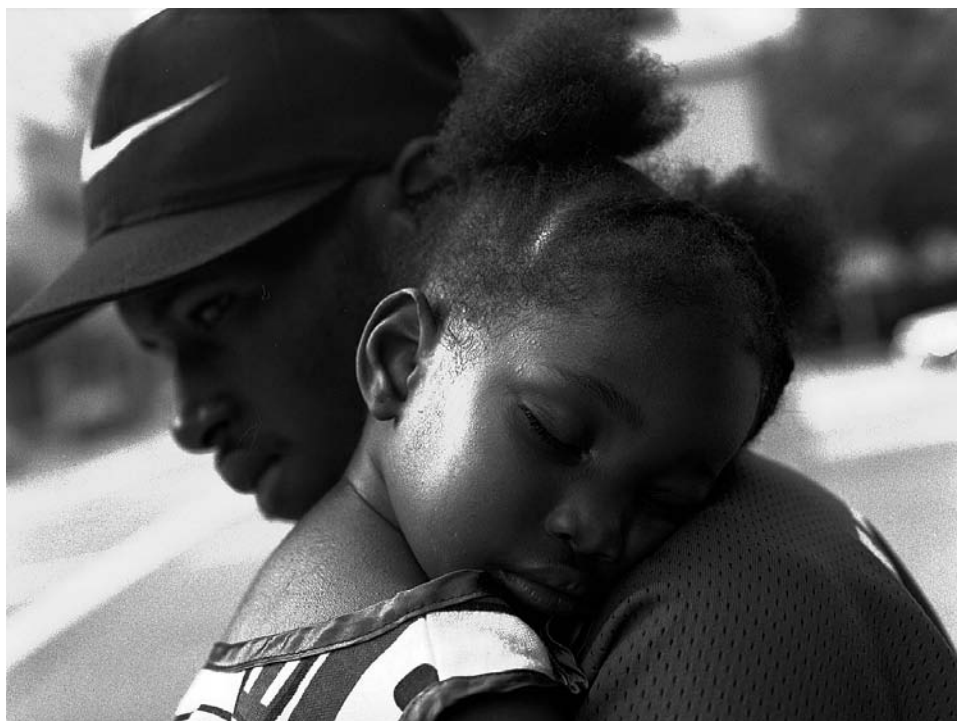
Even for experienced photographers, working the photo is all important. Sometimes in the field I think that one shooting situation or photo is going to be “the one,” but it isn’t. Even after a life of obsessing with photography, I’m never really sure which photograph will end up being the best. So, I advocate that you keep shooting as you dance with your camera—all the while feeling your way through, shooting on impulse, and taking chances. Your medium is digital, and you can always delete later, so shoot freely.

## FIGURES 10.19 AND 10.20

We have so many technical choices to make. With experience, these choices become almost second nature and instantaneous. Selective focus and what to keep sharp is one such choice. Give yourself options in the field and edit later.



ISO 400  
1/500 sec.  
f/4  
70mm lens





## HAVE PATIENCE

Learning and growing as a photographer is a lifelong process. Everything you experience in your life can be infused into the work you create. Patience is not only a virtue in life, but it can also be a huge asset for improving your work.

Life rarely gives you fully finished photographs suitable for framing. It's just not that easy. Maybe every picture you've ever taken could have been improved. If there's any truth to the preceding sentence, you might agree that working the photo a little more is a good idea.

All subjects are not created equal. But there are photographic gifts around every corner and infinite situations with visual potential waiting to be recognized. Confucius said, "Everything has its beauty, but not everyone sees it." When you're ready to see it, getting that shot requires preparation, eye to the viewfinder, moving and tweaking, and waiting for the moment to materialize. It also requires patience (Figure 10.21).



**FIGURE 10.21**

I waited all night for this picture. Knowing the balloons would be released from the ceiling of Madison Square Garden when George Bush and family walked onto center stage, I shot and waited and shot some more, eventually getting this image that shows Mr. Bush very prominently in the frame, even though he's a small figure in a complex image.

I'm a believer in a photographer's needing to get through a sheer volume of work to come out on the other side a stronger, more consistent photographer. But it's not just a quantity thing. The great Henri Cartier-Bresson reminded us that increased patience will lead to more great photographs:

*"Sometimes it happens that you stall, delay, wait for something to happen. Sometimes you have the feeling that here are all the makings of a picture—except for just one thing that seems to be missing. But what one thing? Perhaps someone suddenly walks into your range of view. You follow his progress through the viewfinder. You wait and wait, and then finally you press the button—and you depart with the feeling (though you don't know why) that you've really got something."*

But it's not always easy being patient, and in a digital world, we don't have to be. Some of my colleagues have said that in the not-so-distant film past, they would work a little harder because they couldn't be sure until the film was developed that they got the shots they needed. Does the image-review screen keep you from working the situation to the max (**Figure 10.22**)? Is "good" good enough?

#### FIGURE 10.22

I try to limit my peeking at the image-review screen because I find it distracts me from the task at hand—making photographs. When there are kids in the area and they find out about the picture magically appearing on the screen, it can be a blessing or a curse as you continue to shoot, so be careful!



ISO 1000  
1/60 sec.  
f/5.6  
28mm lens



## REVIEW YOUR WORK

During the many years that I worked as a photojournalist, I developed the habit of taking time at the end of every year to look back and pull out my best work to enter into various contests. Now, as a full-time freelance and documentary photographer, I continue this practice, which gives me a critical look back at the year that was. It's kind of a photographic road map from which I can update my portfolio, track my progress, and spot weaknesses that I can work to improve.

I look at the work and ask myself some questions. Did I work the image enough? Was I shooting from similar angles? Lens-to-subject distances? How can I make things better?

But the somewhat surprising and ultimately disappointing reality I find after completing this exercise is that when I pull out the best of my best from the year—those truly special, magical moments when something extraordinary happened in front of the camera—there are just not that many of them.

Learning to recognize “the magic” when it happens allows you to maximize those rare opportunities.

## FOLLOW THE MAGIC

The compositional dance includes a work ethic that you try and squeeze the best possible photo out of in every shooting situation. You should always work hard and long on every assignment or photographic opportunity. (If you're reading this book, you know it's really a labor of love that pays off in great photographs—and is always worth it.)

The picture of the young boy with the painting illustrates my point (**Figure 10.23**). I remember following two boys who were each carrying a painting, and their father was lagging behind outside the frame. I'm not unhappy with the resulting photograph, but the experience taught me a lesson. When the fast-moving boys turned the corner, I stopped shooting and went the other way. Why did I stop? I'm not really sure.

## FIGURE 10.23

This picture taught me an important lesson about recognizing situations that are better than the ordinary and about working the scene until it goes away.



I figured I had a decent image. The fact that I didn't continue following and shooting this scene nags at me and reminds me not to take anything for granted. I pledged from that day forward that I wouldn't give up on a moment, on a potentially great photograph, if I don't have to—even if I think I may have something good. I didn't have to stop when those kids turned the corner. And although I had taken a picture I thought I liked, if there were better photographs to be had, I will never know.

So I now always follow the magic through until it goes away, the light fades, the subjects are tired, or the moment is gone. Photography is a passion and it's fun, but it's important to push limits, work a little harder, and see where it takes you. This is the compositional dance, too.

I always keep in mind what photographer Melissa Farlow once told me back in the days of film. She said that many times at the end of a shoot when it's late and she's tired and she thinks she has her picture, she will put one more roll into the camera. Sometimes that last roll pushes her to a place she could never have predicted, where those last photographs are better than anything she had taken previously. It's all about working the opportunities and taking chances (**Figure 10.24**).



**FIGURE 10.24**  
It's digital so taking chances costs you nothing but often can deliver surprising and interesting images.

It's hard to get it right every time because there's a nearly infinite number of images we can make. The possibilities of a scene—including or cropping out elements—are virtually unlimited during the in-camera as well as the postprocessing stages (**Figures 10.25** and **10.26**). It helps to take a critical look at the work you do and think of how to make it better. Having a second set of eyes that can articulate and constructively criticize how images can be improved is huge.

And when it's possible, it has been my experience that going back for a second or third try can teach you much and yield spectacular results. You can move past your visual frustrations by learning from your mistakes and correcting them. There is no shame in admitting that your bar is raised very high. Let your subjects know what it is you are after, or that you want to try again. They will often appreciate (but not always understand) the extraordinary effort you are taking to get the best possible images.

## FIGURES 10.25 AND 10.26

When it comes to fast-moving subjects in the field, just shoot, and perfect your composition with the second chance that postprocessing and the Crop tool provide.



## EXPERIENCE LEADS TO INTUITION

In the creative picture-taking process, the choices you make are often intuitive, but they come from experience. As we develop our critical-thinking skills, it gets easier to articulate our feelings about photographs and understand what others are saying about our work. It helps us to ask questions for a clearer understanding on how we can improve.

The more we study the acknowledged great photographs, the more we see the commonalities of strong images and the characteristics they share, as well as the picture components that make the images communicate so powerfully.

After years of teaching and shooting, I've come to the realization that spending time learning about composition, as you are doing with this book, can help you improve your photography and create images that communicate better. As your experience and confidence grow, many of these ideas and concepts get infused into your unconscious process and help you make good aesthetic picture-making decisions on instinct.

## Chapter 10 Assignments

By completing the following assignments, you'll be on your way toward improving your unique compositions.

### Getting Close

This assignment forces me out of my comfort zone and gives me ideas for future shoots. Set your lens to its minimum focusing distance and photograph 40 frames in close proximity to your main subject. It's not a lens-to-subject distance you've likely tried often, but it forces you to see in new ways with limited depth of field, even stopped down some. As always, pay attention to the entire frame and challenge yourself to include people as part of this assignment, giving them fair warning, of course, that you're about to get close.

### The Dance

By moving around with your eye to the viewfinder, shooting as you adjust your camera position, you can discover new and dynamic compositions that you never would have without the dance. Choose a subject and challenge yourself to take 40 completely different compositions of the same subject or scene. It will stretch your visual muscles and make it easier to try new angles on future shoots.

### Get Vertical

Too often photographers ignore the vertical composition, even when it might best communicate visually the scene you're recording. Set out to find some interesting subjects that work vertically, from buildings to portraits. Challenge yourself to continue shooting until you've shot 40 vertical frames that work. By completing this exercise, you'll be able to see vertical compositions more often. If you're one of those rare photographers who shoots mostly verticals, substitute the word horizontal for vertical and start shooting!

*Share your results with the book's Flickr group!*

*Join the group here: [flickr.com/groups/composition\\_fromsnapshotstogreatshots](https://www.flickr.com/groups/composition_fromsnapshotstogreatshots)*

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